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Graphics don't do a great deal for me. I like a good-looking game, don't get me wrong, but 'good looking' can mean a lot of things. I would consider *Journey*, for instance, to be one of the most beautiful games released in the last ten years. It's not exactly pushing the boundaries of graphical fidelity, but it has a style and sets a scene in a gorgeous way. I respect style more than I respect resolution. I care about cinematography more than I care about polygons.

For this reason, looking at a game like *Fallout 4* and seeing just how large and rich a world Bethesda is creating, seeing how much more colourful the Commonwealth looks compared to the Capital Wasteland, I'm impressed. I don't much care that it's not that big a leap from *Fallout 3* or that it might be compared pretty directly with *Skyrim*. Visuals might intoxicate for a moment, but they won't sustain 100 hours of game time the way I'm confident any Bethesda game can.

I get the debate and I think it's right that we keep asking developers to push further, but the kneejerk reaction of swearing off a new triple-A game because it doesn't hold up to some imagined graphical standard is foreign to me. I would rather developers kept pushing with deeper and more nuanced narratives, more well-rounded characters and more concrete themes. I want games to keep growing up, and being distracted by shiny things isn't a part of that journey.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




★ LEADER ★ 4 WINS ★
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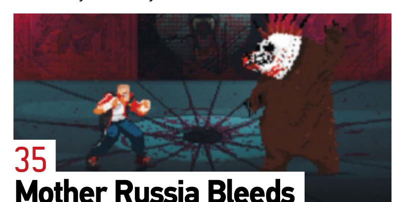


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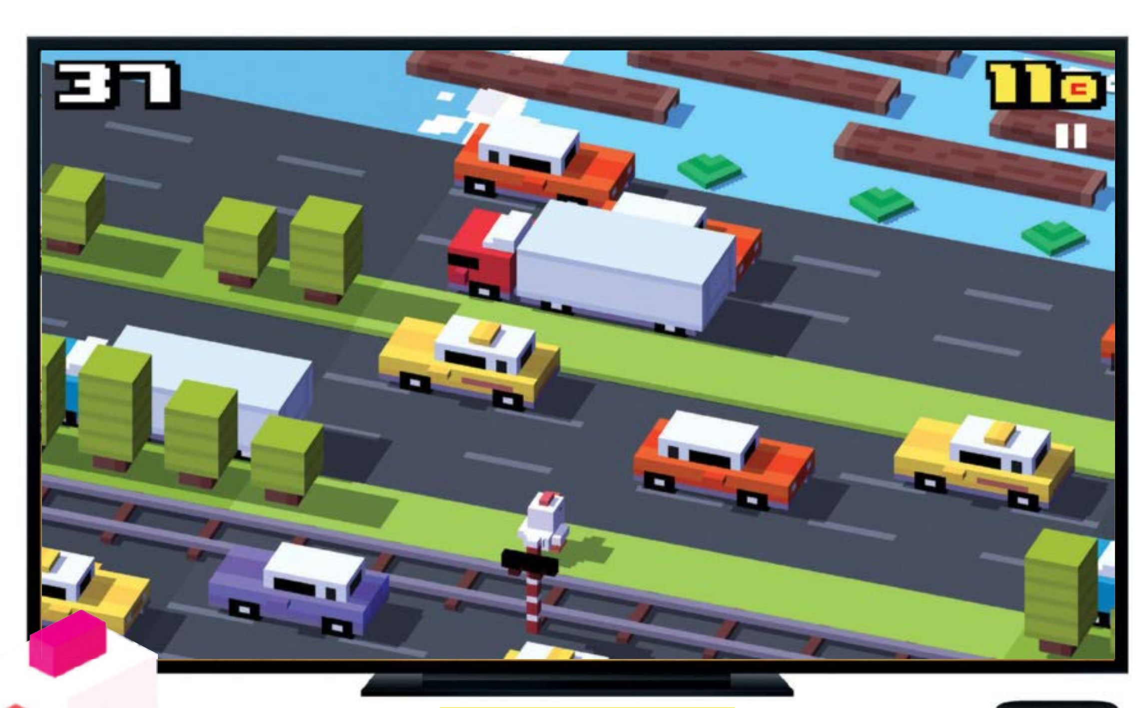
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FANTASTIC
We sit down with Mad Catz to find out how it rebuilt and improved on the Rock Band hardware

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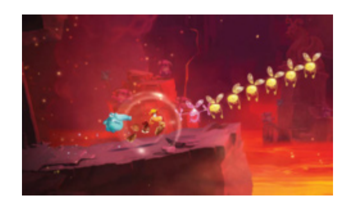
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(NOW FIGHT A NEW RIVAL)

Can Apple Topple The Console Market?

→ Will the software and hardware giant beat Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo in the home console market with its new Apple TV?



The next round of competition to Sony's unshakable PS4 and Microsoft's underdog Xbox One isn't going to come in the form of Nintendo's mysterious new NX platform. Instead, it looks like Apple has come totally from the left-field and entered the console arms race, barging in on the market with the new Apple TV hardware.

Thing is, the new Apple TV isn't all about gaming – it's a device intended more for streaming music and TV, like the older Apple TV models. The gaming capabilities are totally peripheral to the hardware's main function. So how could Apple dethrone the Big Three when Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo have made a point of targeting the living room for the last few generations? Can Apple simply waltz in and undermine all that hard work with a device that's meant, for all intents and purposes, for the casual market?

"The Apple TV's gaming functions look like they're aimed a lot more at the Wii than the Playstation or Xbox," explains tech analyst Jan Dawson (on behalf of Jackdaw). "Apple is probably only a serious threat at this point to Nintendo, because it's not going to be going after the hardcore gaming market that Sony and Microsoft serve. If I were Nintendo, I'd be thinking very hard about developing games for the Apple TV at this point."

Interestingly enough, the day following Apple TV's announcement, Nintendo took to social media to unveil its first *true* mobile endeavour – *Pokémon GO*, a GPS-enabled augmented reality MMO that turns anyone with a smartphone into a wandering Pokémon trainer. Though it's not aimed directly at Apple TV, the game shows a willingness from Nintendo to adapt to the new market, something the company has traditionally been reluctant to do. This step out into compatibility with Apple is a watershed

DATA STREAM → STAR FOX ZERO HAS BEEN DELAYED FROM A 2015 RELEASE TO Q1 2016

moment, a statement of intent from Nintendo. So is it possible for Apple to topple the other two? Maybe it doesn't need to, maybe the casual market itself is so big that Apple will become the de facto home console and Microsoft and Sony will become the niche – despite those multi-million sales figures for each console.

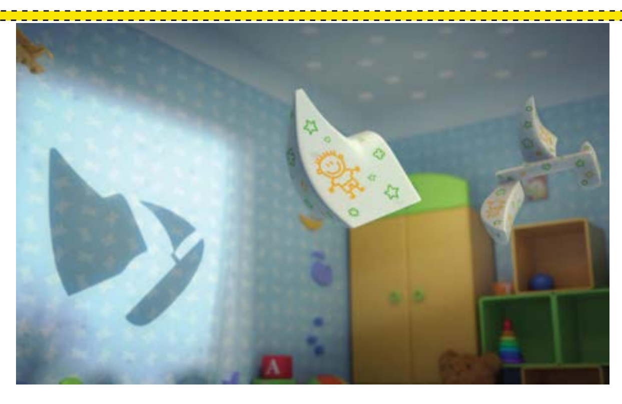
"I THINK THE mainstream gaming community now is the casual gaming community, and that's a much larger base of gamers than hardcore gamers," explains Dawson. "Apple is straying a little beyond the casual gaming market with some of the launch titles, but the reality is that the Apple TV is likely underpowered to really compete for hardcore gamers, and I don't think that's the market Apple is going after."

The fact that Apple is already an internationally recognised brand with widely accepted market dominance sets up a potential Apple console well – after all, who wouldn't buy a console they'd already own music, games and TV on? "Apple's existing base of iOS gamers and developers is absolutely critical to the success of the Apple TV. Bringing both those users and developers over from iPhone and iPad gaming is a central part of the strategy here. And I bet you'll see a lot of the same games make their way across," says Dawson.

> "The Apple TV's gaming functions look like they're aimed a lot more at the Wii than the Playstation or Xbox"
>
> Jan Dawson, Jackdaw tech analyst

We've already seen commercial/critical success *Transistor* announced for the platform, as well as Activision's new *Guitar Hero Live* platform. They're ports, but that doesn't mean Apple isn't diverting resources to create unique games for the TV, too – Harmonix (you know, the *Rock Band* developer) is creating a bespoke game for the Apple TV, called *Beat Sports*.

And that's not all – Apple's TV release also drives another nail into Amazon's multi-faceted approach to media delivery: the long-term Apple rival has been slow out of the door with its Amazon Fire TV (supported by the much-hyped but incredibly quiet Amazon Game Studios), and now Apple has undercut the business model… well, it could kill Amazon's attempt at a home console before it even launches.



Below 3D puzzle games like *Shadowmatic* make good use of the Apple TV's unique remote and hardware capabilities

"Amazon's biggest problem is that very few developers today develop for Amazon explicitly – it's often an afterthought or a bit of additional work after developing for Android, which is obviously a much bigger platform than Amazon's," explains Dawson." So even when Amazon gets its act together on its Studios project, I don't think that's going to make a meaningful difference. And at the same time, one of the big advantages of Amazon Fire TV [was] that it had content the Apple TV didn't, including from Amazon itself, and I'm betting that will change now, making it even less attractive."

It remains to be seen how exactly Apple is going to approach the console portion of its TV. So far, the company has been suspiciously quiet about games integration, but maybe this is a stealth operation: wait until everyone's got an Apple TV in their homes, then deliver a payload of exclusive, platform-specific games to a whole new audience that never really considered themselves gamers before. Which – despite the potential cost to Amazon and Nintendo – we can't help but think will benefit the greater games industry itself.



Below No sooner had Apple revealed its Apple TV update than Steelseries was ready with this very tidy new controller for it.

Pretenders To The Throne

→ The Apple TV is the most recent of the outsider consoles attempting to dethrone the big three… let's recap the more ambitious hardware

OUYA



The Ouya was one of gaming's more spectacular fails. The plucky little machine was intended to be the future of the games industry – but without proper online infrastructure, the whole thing fell apart somewhat.

AMAZON FIRE TV



Amazon's little streaming device that tried so hard to convert streamers to players never really took off, mostly because there was little to no support for the gaming side of things on the device.



OUYE

A strange Chinese console paid for by crowdfunding, the Ouye is by far the most derivative console we've ever seen – it looks like the PS4 and Xbox One's Frankenstein child, and even its name is a spin-off of the doomed Ouya.

NVIDIA SHIELD



The Nvidia Shield markets itself as a handheld PC, basically, and while that should promise a positive reaction, sales and general compatibility with the machine have been generally lacklustre.






(MAN, MONKEY AND MADNESS)

Inset You see that monkey? Yeah, that guy attended the interview. Never left its master's lap.

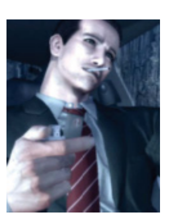
Inside the bizarre mind of Swery

→ We pick the brain of Hidetaka 'Swery' Suehiro, creator of the wonderfully weird Deadly Premonition and D4, about the state of Japanese indie development and what the future holds



How does a Japanese indie go about getting noticed in the West?
Events like BitSummit [see boxout] are great places for people to learn about Access Games, the kind of things we've worked on – because even in Japan there is still a large number of people who don't know about us. Also, while there are quite a few people who know about me – who I am and what I've done – I still want to reach out to more people, both Japanese and other nationalities, and spread the word. Japanese creators have a tendency to group only with other Japanese creators. I like to get in the middle and connect the two with each other. While there are a large number of indie creators in Japan, there is also a large tendency for people to join a large company rather than venture out alone. It's still pretty hard to raise up independents here. When I started Access Games thirteen years ago, I wanted to get away from the big companies and do my own thing, but I think that there's a kind of… societal problem in Japan that prevents that from happening very often.

What kind of problem?
People who play games get made fun of. "Stop playing games and go study!" So, if you're in a game company then people think you're just playing around. Yet, when I travel to countries like America, I'm always amazed by how welcoming everyone is to creators like myself.



Above "Hey, Zach. I watched a movie last night. You listening, Zach? Of course you are. The coffee told me that you would be listening."

We're surprised at that, considering Japan's thriving games industry. Arcades are still popular, for example.
There are a lot of arcades in Japan, but arcades themselves – they used to be a place where delinquents would gather. So there's still this image that they're a place that will somehow cause people to misbehave.

So how is Japanese gaming culture reacting to more online gaming services, like Steam?
I recently put *D4* out on Steam and I was amazed by just how huge a platform it is. Broadly speaking, though, Japanese PC games are erotic games. It's horrible. But that's the truth, and there's not much you can do about it.

I don't really know why the Japanese are so attached to physical products, but I guess that unlike in many Western countries, a lot of Japanese people don't own land, so they're serious about their material possessions. What they buy, they can own. As a people, we can also fear change – broadly speaking, we're very conservative. But that's also why we can retain such historically significant cities such as Kyoto, so there are good sides.

So it's not just consumer preference?
Japan places limitations on things such as violence and sexual scenes, and this makes



LONG LOST BANDAI NAMCO TITLE NI-OH HAS BEEN RESURRECTED AS A PS4 EXCLUSIVE REVEALED AT TGS



Inset Moving ever further away from its Kinect origins, *D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die* launched on Steam earlier this year.

A GATHERING FOR JAPANESE INDIES

EARLIER THIS YEAR, BitSummit – Japan's largest indie games event – was held in Kyoto. Although still in its infancy, the show is showing healthy growth despite something odd that stands out: there is a huge presence from smaller Western developers.

While expanding diversity is always welcome, the reality that Japanese indies were at risk of being outnumbered at home does lend some weight to Swery's comments about wanting to see more Japanese developers get their faces out there and do their own thing, rather than aspire towards (less secure than for previous generations) corporate careers.

Interestingly, a lot of the Japanese developers in attendance were selling physical copies of their work, and not the ironically-packaged-as-a-retro-game kind of physical copies.

> "Independent Japanese creators need to let loose and sell themselves as much as they can"
> Hidetaka Suehiro, director

it difficult for things to freely be digitally distributed over here. Also, television media often says that the internet is dangerous and it'll ruin children – a lot of parents believe that, which is something that needs to change. Many people still watch television in this country, so in many ways we are very far behind. Maybe by about twenty years.

Is self-promotion difficult in Japan, then?
It is hard, in Japan, to enter a company and then promote yourself, because you're doing that on company money. But independent Japanese creators need to let loose and sell themselves as much as they can. A lot of Japanese developers are actually shy about showing their faces, and I think that this is because they don't have confidence about how they look.

What about direct interaction with fans?
My company doesn't have money for PR, so it's very important for us to talk to someone directly and then – maybe, hopefully – have them go and talk to someone else. This sort of word-of-mouth PR… well, instead of money we have to use time, so community involvement is highly valuable.

If you could give the smaller Japanese developers once piece of advice, what would it be?
Copyright is essential for the future! If you're just thinking about your own salary, then you don't really need to think about copyright. But I am thinking about the future of my company and its staff members and their families – I want to create IP to allow those people to live on and make a living. The example I always fall back on comes from when I went to Egypt and saw the pyramids – these things that were made thousands upon thousands of years ago are still feeding the future families of Egypt.

One big mistake that Japanese developers make is not establishing their own copyrights, and another one is using more money than they're given – going over budget. In Western countries, when your budget starts to run thin, you shrink the game or change the contents or even cancel it. In Japan, if you run out of money you just continue the project and wait for more money. It's a big problem.

This is because the people who do business in Japan, and the people who make games here, are completely separate. Japanese creators do not understand business like their Western counterparts. Indies do everything by themselves – they find help by themselves, they make games by themselves – so they have a better understanding of business. Trying to sell your games to an overseas market is a great idea.

Below *Deadly Premonition* remains a gloriously strange and challenging game with its *Twin Peaks* inspirations and often infuriating controls. It's a cult classic for a reason.




MASS EFFECT AND KOTOR WRITER DREW KARPYSHYN HAS RETURNED TO BIOWARE AFTER FOUR YEARS AWAY

> “Square continues to fumble with innovation while Atlus perfects a classic formula”

TGS delivered... as long as you own a PlayStation system

I'm not entirely convinced that the Tokyo Game Show even *happened* last year. Sony likes to save its big announcements for its own events, Nintendo's Direct-led format is still proving effective and Microsoft may as well just pull out of Japan now to deny us the amusement of Xbox One being outsold by Vita TV *again*. Still, this year was different. While not perhaps as epic as when Japan was truly the seat of power for the videogame industry, TGS actually had reveals, announcements and showings this year, leaving us in no doubt that it actually happened and giving us hope for the Japanese console scene.

If you've been wondering where all the console JRPGs have disappeared to, this show should have quelled your concerns. New RPGs were absolutely everywhere, from *Project Setsuna* to a new *Kingdom Hearts* remake that somehow managed to top its predecessors in terms of ludicrous titling – it might be a remake of a 3DS game but you'd never know with a name like *Kingdom Hearts HD II.8 Final Chapter Prologue*. Updates on existing projects also proved welcome, although the delays not so much – *Persona 5*, the stylish successor to *Final Fantasy* as the popular RPG of choice as Square continues to fumble with innovation while Atlus perfects a classic formula, slipped to next year to no one's surprise, but it's still disappointing.

One thing that *did* surprise me, however, was the sheer amount of new stuff that didn't fall under the JRPG umbrella. Sony chose TGS to unveil *Bloodborne*'s stunning new expansion, while Koei Tecmo stunned crowds by showing off a revived *Ni-Oh*, now a PS4 exclusive that looks like a cross between *Onimusha*, *Ninja Gaiden* and *Dark Souls*. These two titles were as close as we got to the Western market pandering that has plagued the show in recent years, both games that manage to retain that mystery and magic of the best Japanese-developed games while still enjoying universal appeal. This, for me, is where the future lies for Japan's triple-A console scene.

Niche titles will continue to export well via the likes of Atlus, NIS, Marvelous, Rising Star, etc, but costs are growing high for expansive RPGs. The big ones will survive (*FF* and *Dragon Quest* are going nowhere, obviously), as will the smallest but the mid-tier is suffering, crushed between these two extremes. Those mid-tier titles – something like *Nier* is a perfect example – need to adapt, either slashing budgets to make them viable or, as in the case of *Nier*, upping the stakes (say, by bringing in the masters at Platinum to do your combat) and hoping the risk pays off.

I don't know where *Gravity Rush 2* fits into this theory of mine, though, but I'm glad it exists. And I'm even more glad to own a PS4. Next year, there will be more damage numbers, rousing battle themes and nonsense haircuts than I'll know what to do with...

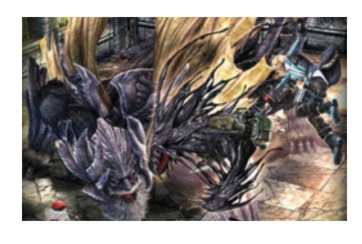


Luke Albigés is Editor of **Play** magazine and is glad to see TGS back on form, if surprisingly one-sided...

Import Watch

→ God Eater Resurrection

There's a fair chance that you never played the original game on PSP, so why wouldn't you want the opportunity to rectify this now that you have a PS4 and everyone remasters everything? This is a franchise that was born at the height of *Monster Hunter* mania so you know what to expect – four player co-op, huge beasts to slay and turn into equipment... all par for the course, really. The original was good so hopefully this remaster will deliver for anyone missing *MH* on PlayStation platforms.





SONY'S VR HEADSET, PROJECT MORPHEUS, HAS OFFICIALLY BEEN RENAMED PLAYSTATION VR

> For the last 15 years we have been preaching the gospel that eSports are different

Since when did eSports become a product?

For quite some time now a debate has gone back and forth: is eSports a sport? Up until now I have refrained from commenting, as it matters not a jot even if you do overlook the rather large clue to be found in the 'e'. However, I never thought I would witness an eSports organisation label the industry they are supposed to be pioneering as nothing more than a "product".

For me, the moment you take all the passion and drive out of your sport and class it as nothing more than a "product" designed to deliver healthy profit margins to shareholders, that's the moment the dreams of a new horizon in our industry dies. The players, teams and games are stripped of their importance with crazy formats, schedules and conditions that make a mockery of our growing competitive endeavour.

Not to mention how little the fans then matter. Well, that's not entirely true as long as they have £50 to buy a team's jersey. Then the fans are actually very important. Yes, while premiership football teams up and down the country are reducing the cost of shirts, certain organisations in eSports are putting the prices up. And it's not the teams' doing; you can buy the same jerseys directly from their websites for £30. You could argue that this of course is how business works. You have to make money; however, for the last 15 years we have been preaching the gospel that eSports are different from traditional sports. How could it not be? After all eSports was in that enviable position where it could learn from all the mistakes made by all the sports that came before it.

But here we are, 15 years later, and we have managed to find ourselves at exactly the same point that other sports took half a century to get to. So what does this mean? Well, it means that like a true sport we are truly evolving as we no longer have to come together to battle against outsiders who do not understand what eSports is. We now have to look at the next battle on the horizon, which will be an internal struggle for the soul of what eSports stands for and one I fear will be a lot harder to win. But as long as we hold onto the thousands of people who every day pour their passion and joy into eSports, whose motivation is the excitement that they get from top level competition, we have a chance to deliver the dream that lead us to this point. But rest assured, just as I have never called football a product I will never call eSports one either.



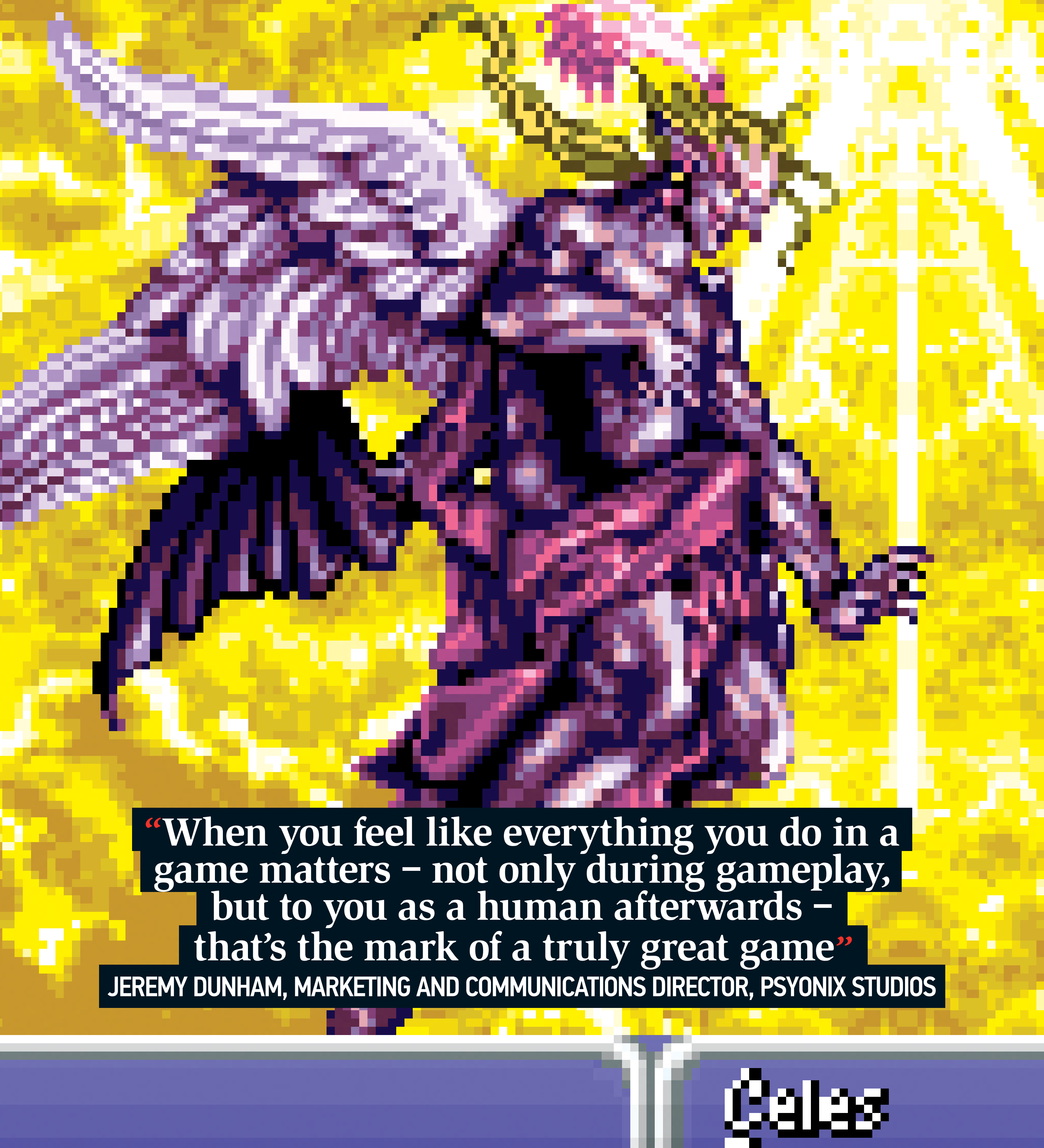
Paul Kent has over 16 years experience in the eSports industry and is currently eSports Director at the UK's leading eSports company Gfinity



Gfinity's Summer Masters event was packed with games like *Hearthstone*, launched into eSports competition through the passion of fans.

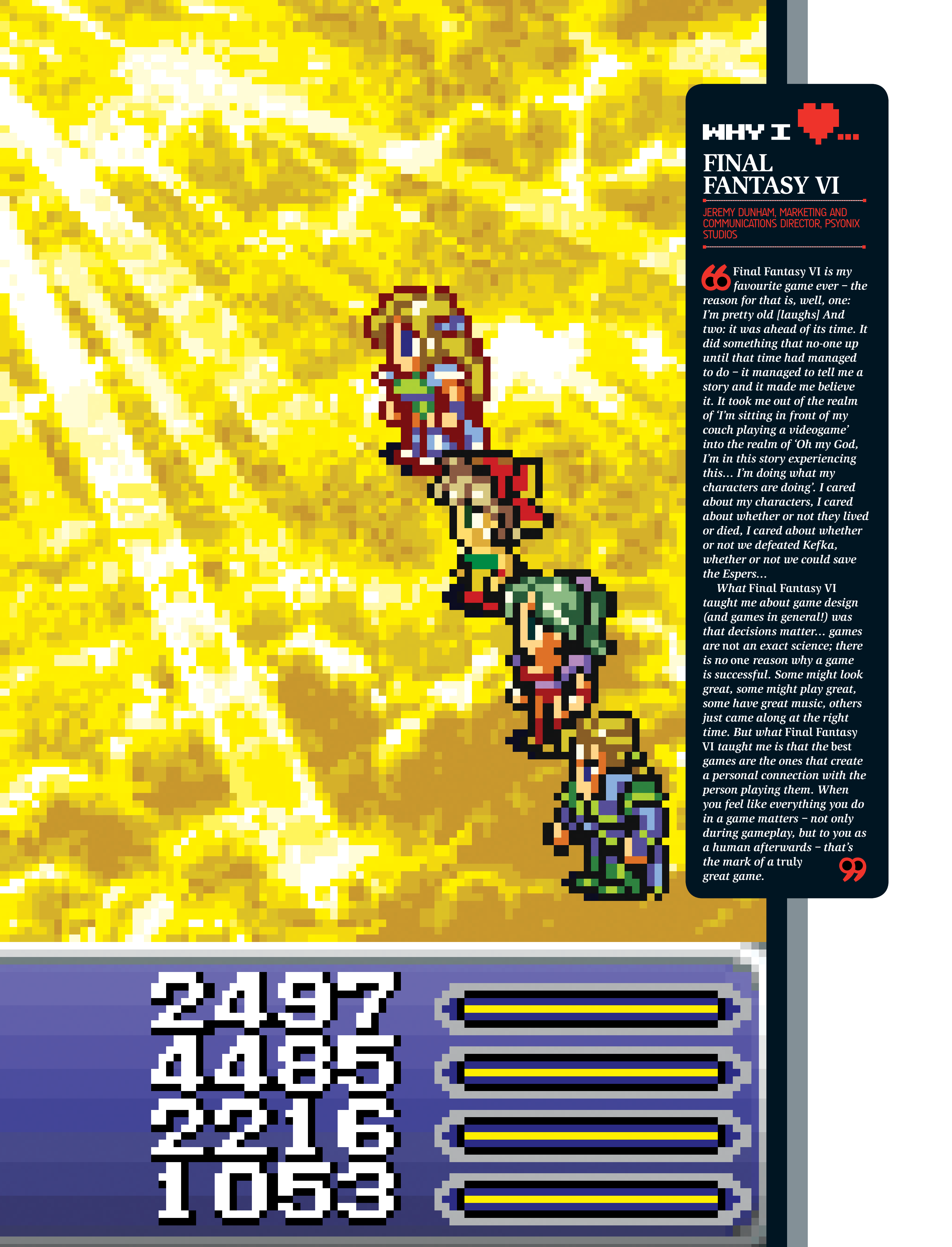


OVER ONE MILLION LEVELS WERE MADE IN SUPER MARIO MAKER IN ONLY ITS FIRST WEEK ON SALE



> "When you feel like everything you do in a game matters – not only during gameplay, but to you as a human afterwards – that's the mark of a truly great game"
>
> JEREMY DUNHAM, MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR, PSYONIX STUDIOS

Celes
Relm
Terra
Edgar



WHY I ♥...

FINAL FANTASY VI

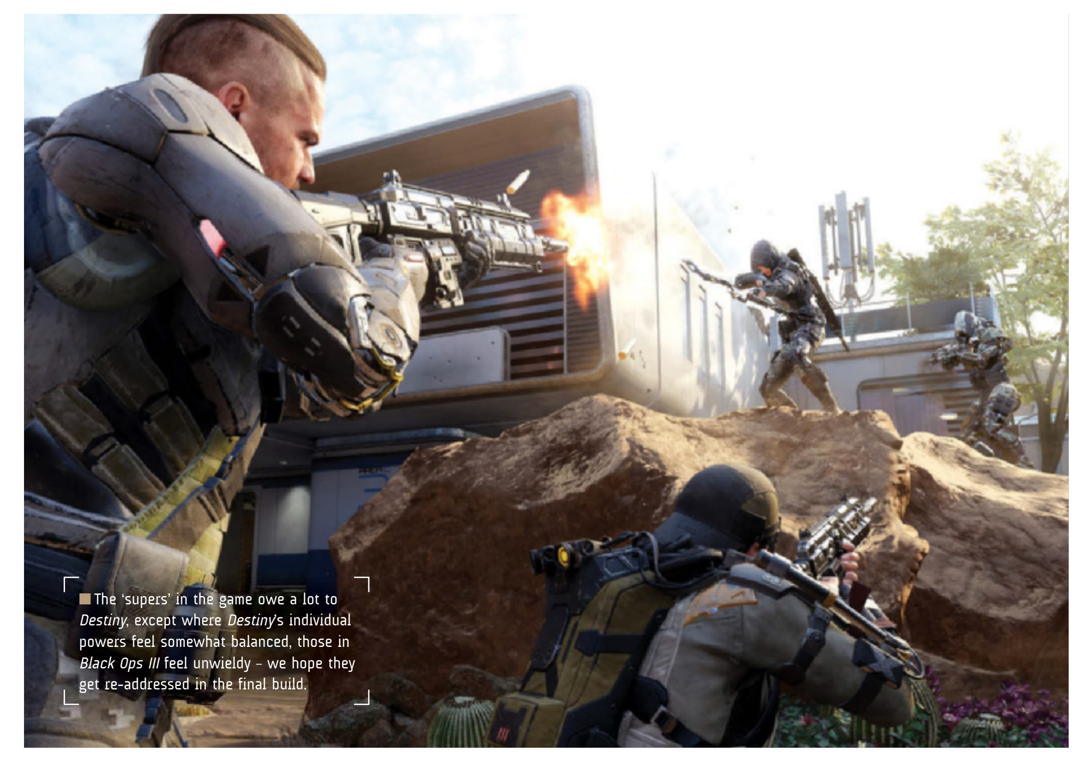
JEREMY DUNHAM, MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR, PSYONIX STUDIOS

"Final Fantasy VI is my favourite game ever – the reason for that is, well, one: I'm pretty old [laughs] And two: it was ahead of its time. It did something that no-one up until that time had managed to do – it managed to tell me a story and it made me believe it. It took me out of the realm of 'I'm sitting in front of my couch playing a videogame' into the realm of 'Oh my God, I'm in this story experiencing this… I'm doing what my characters are doing'. I cared about my characters, I cared about whether or not they lived or died, I cared about whether or not we defeated Kefka, whether or not we could save the Espers…

What Final Fantasy VI taught me about game design (and games in general!) was that decisions matter… games are not an exact science; there is no one reason why a game is successful. Some might look great, some might play great, some have great music, others just came along at the right time. But what Final Fantasy VI taught me is that the best games are the ones that create a personal connection with the person playing them. When you feel like everything you do in a game matters – not only during gameplay, but to you as a human afterwards – that's the mark of a truly great game."

"Black Ops II is a dark, gritty future where a new breed of black ops soldier emerges and the lines are blurred between our own humanity and the cutting-edge military robotics that define the future of combat"

STATEMENT BLACK OPS III WEBSITE



The 'supers' in the game owe a lot to *Destiny*, except where *Destiny*'s individual powers feel somewhat balanced, those in *Black Ops III* feel unwieldy – we hope they get re-addressed in the final build.





Call Of Duty: Black Ops III

CONCEPT ■ The world has been decimated by drone warfare, and so focus has shifted back to the soldier on the ground… and that's where you come in

Thinking outside the hitbox

Remember in old platforming games where, right at the start of the level, there'd be a pitfall – a trap that was placed to make you learn how to jump, how to navigate obstacles, how to remain alive? Well, funnily enough, *Black Ops III* has the same thing… which feels somewhat out of place in a *Call Of Duty* game, right? It serves the same purpose as those pitfalls did some 30 years ago, though: the traversal in the multiplayer portion of *Black Ops III* is vital, and the game wants you to learn – immediately – that if you try to take shortcuts through the maps, you can die.

And we died. We died a fair few times trying to wall-run, jump, dash and slide into enemy positions. Some of this, we'll admit, was down to our own failings (the minimap embedded in the top-left of the screen was telling us where the map boundaries were, but we wanted to test that data, you know?) When these environmental deaths *weren't* our fault, though, we got frustrated.

Black Ops III has toned down the erratic boost-jumps that formed that main online experience in *Advanced Warfare* – taking over from Sledgehammer this year, Treyarch has instead opted for a more grounded take on vertical traversal: you've still got a double-jump and you can still wall-run, but it all feels more muted now… more *Call Of Duty*, less *Titanfall*.

That said, speed is still of the essence. We started trying to play the game like *Destiny* or *Halo* – holding back, checking our corners and playing a more strategic game… and we were punished for that. Punished horribly. Treyarch has done a good job of keeping *Call Of Duty* safely in the twitch-shooting, arcade-family FPS zone: success is running-and-gunning, success is quicker reflexes than your opponents, and success is killstreaks.

Herein lies one of our problems with the Beta build of the multiplayer: it feels too reliant on random successes: collision detection seems way off – from the myriad matches we played, you're just as likely to take out an opponent with two shots to the knee as you are with two shots to the head. It doesn't make sense to us – we spent a long time trying to figure out what the damage values of our favourite gun (the insurmountable Man-O-War) meant in relation to its other stats: rate of fire, accuracy, and so on… as it turns out, it means very little – by day two of the Beta, every gun everyone had equipped would kill you in a heartbeat, no questions asked. It goes against the rock/paper/scissors triangle that FPS players have come to abuse, and for that we're thankful… but what's the point in using a sniper when you're just as likely to land an assault rifle potshot across the map, right? (We ended up with so many 'Long Shot' medals we just felt cheap…)

/// So you mash Square, you respawn instantly and the whole cycle begins again. We wouldn't go as far as saying *Call Of Duty* feels mindless (we've seen the eSports leagues that prove there's a solid game underneath the feeding frenzies we saw on the Beta), but the general match-ups we played seemed more inclined with killing and killing and killing than playing any kind of tactical game. The verticality that's been deftly snuck into the maps only serves to give players an aerial advantage when running about – shooting from the hip when wall-running or doing 'death from above' melee attacks.

The introduction of Specialist classes has gone some way towards upsetting the typical *Call Of Duty* 'feeling', though; more than anything, these new 'supers' that are equipable to your character felt more like *Destiny* than any other *Call Of Duty* game so far. You're given a meter that slowly builds in the bottom-right of the screen, and when it's full, you can activate hit R1 and L1 to instigate a power that takes about minute to diminish (or which will last until you're killed, which is more likely, to be honest).

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Treyarch
Release: 6 November 2015
Players: 1-16

Developer Profile

Treyarch first came into the public light with the licensed James Bond effort, *Quantum Of Solace*, but had been operating since 1998. After Activision trusted the studio with the *Call Of Duty* franchise, the studio quickly began making a name for itself, and it all started with *Call Of Duty II*



Developer History

Die by the Sword
1998 [PC]
Spider-Man
2002 [Dreamcast, GameCube, PS2, Xbox]
Call of Duty 3
2006 [PS2, PS3, Xbox, Xbox 360]
Call of Duty: Black Ops
2010 [PC, PS3, Wii, 360]

High Point

Call Of Duty: Black Ops was a refreshing change of pace back in 2010 – the innovative online modes and gritty Eighties settings were a pleasant change from the deathmatch mad modern-day shooters that saturated the industry at the time.

These Supers don't guarantee you kills, nor do they massively change the game in any huge way: they simply give you an extra perk or weapon while they're active – some of them incredibly useful, some of them a little less so. Take, for example, the 'Gravity Spikes' the specialist Ruin has – they're supposed to create a bigger decent shockwave that kills enemies in a wide area-of-effect when you activate them… but it doesn't. It's actually got the same range as a melee attack, and will only *definitely* kill someone if you manage to drop down directly on top of them… which – in a *Call Of Duty* game – is an incredibly rare occurrence, unfortunately.

So no-one in the games we played chose Ruin (or, if they did, they opted to equip his ability instead – the Overdrive perk that massively increases movement speed… that and a shotgun together is actually a viable play). Instead, most people opted for Outrider – the female bow-user that has a one-shot kill compound bow with explosive rounds. Her ability basically allows you to one-shot enemies while sprinting, keeping the enemy team off your back while getting potshots in wherever you can. We actually managed to skewer three enemies at once with these explosive arrows – which we might call over-powered if it didn't feel so empowering to pull off!

/// The other most popular character choice of the Beta is Prophet – whose special weapon is yet another love letter to *Destiny*, it seems: his Tempest gun acts in an identical way to the Fusion Rifles from the game, albeit with an added chain-lightning effect that'll kill anyone within a couple of metres of the shock's initial impact. Outside of that, the *Destiny* comparisons come thick and fast: specialist Nomad can resurrect himself (like the Sunsinger), specialist Seraph has the 'Annihilator', which is a carbon copy of a Hunter's Golden Gun in *Destiny*, and Reaper basically pulls out a Heavy Machine Gun straight from *Destiny*'s vaults when he triggers his special weapon.

So while these supers don't change the meat of the game as much as they do in that other Activision game, they certainly make the run-and-gun gameplay that's become part and parcel of the *Call Of Duty* experience more variable: we mainly played with Outrider and her Sparrow bow – hitting that golden ring of super at the right time and pulling out the bow to devastate the enemy team was easily the highlight of the many hours we played the Beta. It's a shame that not all the characters and their respective abilities granted the same power fantasy.

However, this was only the Beta, and we imagine Treyarch has been crunching the telemetry pretty hard to sort out what balancing issues need addressing before the game's proper release.

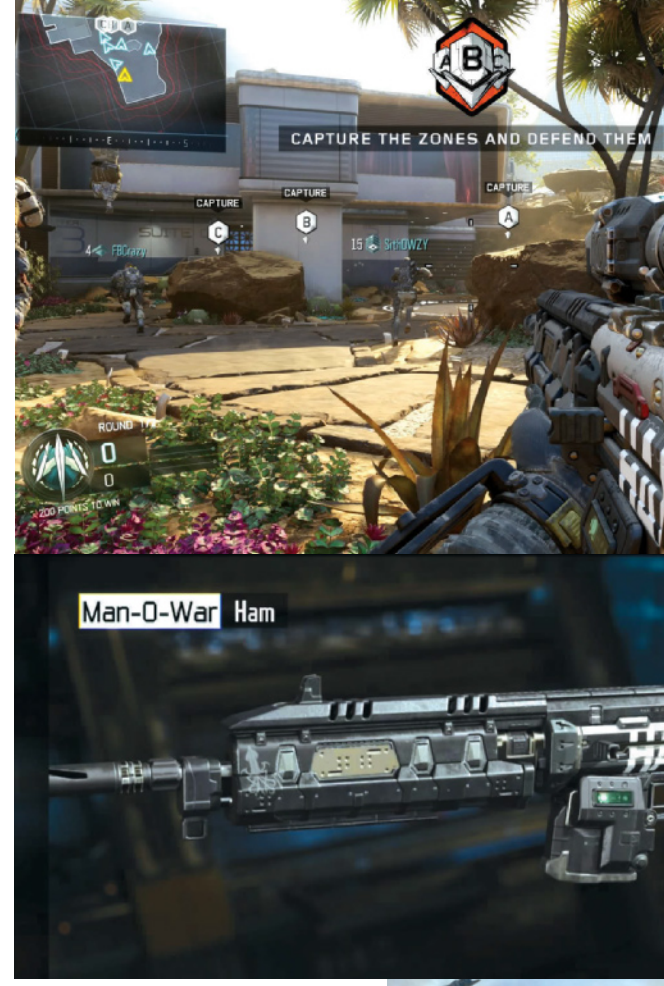
/// Speaking of balancing issues, the old *Call Of Duty* favourites – killstreaks – make a return. For some players, this will be a welcome perk of the multiplayer, but for others… well, it takes a lot of getting used to. The core conceit of the killstreak system is that the longer you stay alive, the more rewards you get: hit 15 or so kills in a row and you can bring in a mothership or a nuke or something else equally as ridiculous that practically ensures your team's victory.

Black Ops III brings in some new perks for the killstreaks – you'll still start off with the tried-and-tested favourites; a UAV drone, a hail of missiles, a care package and so on. But after that, it all gets a bit silly: there are a few drones that you can command from a remote location, and they make sense within the games setup, but then there's the RAPS (or Robotic Anti-Personnel Sentry drones). These are rolling balls of robotic terror that seem to be infinite, just rolling around spreading death and chaos. You can shoot these drones, but if an enemy player gets them, they'll come at you seemingly forever until you die. They're frustrating to play against but fun to use, making them a difficult equation to solve for the dev team.

> "Every player is completely customisable: from weapons and load outs, to abilities and outfits"
>
> STATEMENT BLACK OPS III WEBSITE

Therein lies our main problem with the *Black Ops III* Beta – killstreaks stack and stack and if there's one player dominating your team, matches are surprisingly hard to flip. If you get pushed underfoot in the first three minutes of play, you can practically guarantee that's where you'll stay, thanks to the accelerated killstreak perks preventing you from getting a foothold. Pair that up with the fact we only saw capture points rotate once in our many, many games of Domination and we think there are some serious balancing and matchmaking options that need to be addressed in *Black Ops III* before the main game launches.

At least we have faith that Treyarch will take the touch-and-go nature of this Beta run on board, though.

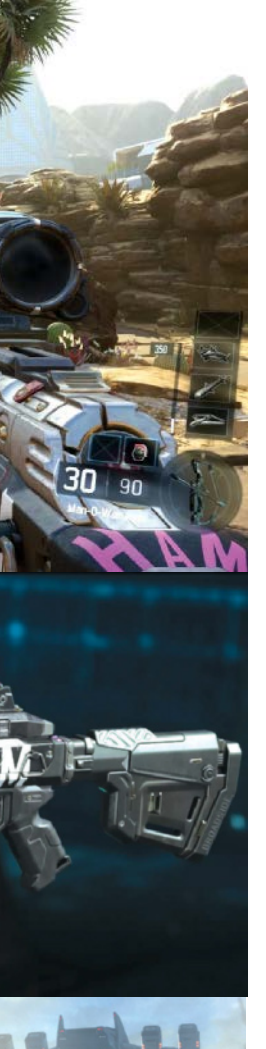




Above: Getting into the nitty-gritty of customising a gun is one of the best new additions to a *Call Of Duty* game we've seen in years. Right: Any game with a bow is fantastic – we already know that – but Outrider's Sparrow bow makes us feel incredibly cool and powerful at the same time.



Right: The round-up screen is nicely presented – a good podium for your achievements – but the way it pans up as the results load is a bit… lazy.

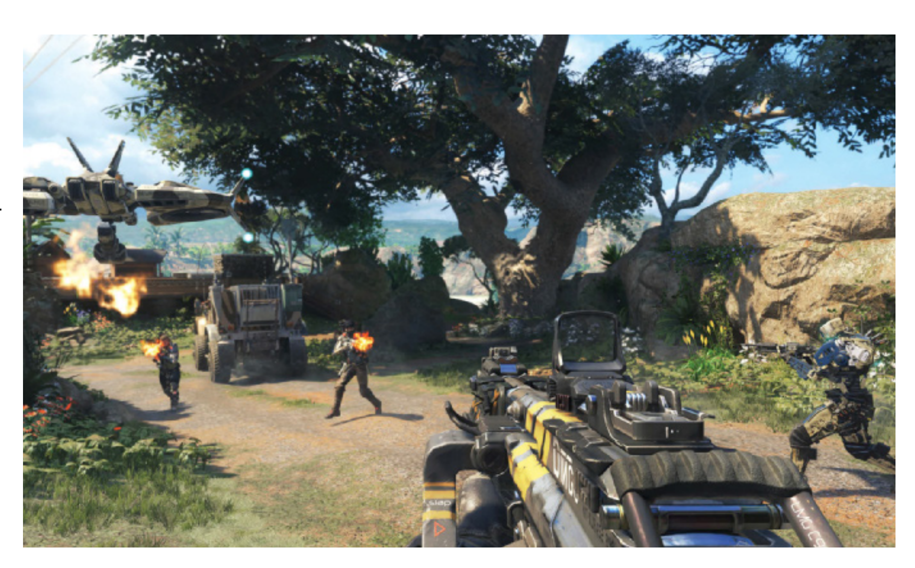


LOADOUTS & LOOKOUTS

THE BETA GAVE us access to three maps: Hunted, Combine and Evac – three very different locales. Hunted was by far our favourite; sneaky aquatic routes mixed with cave systems and vantage points to provide amazing firefight chokepoints.

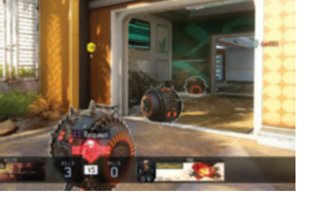
Combine was also good fun. There were wall-running sections where you'd engage in quick fights and try to knock other players off the wall. The best bit? A traditional *Call Of Duty* stand-off point in the middle of the map where two teams could get deeply embedded for an entire match.

Last, there's Evac – an abandoned emergency evacuation camp. This was our least favourite: it was mostly outdoors, so when killstreak-abusing mega-players got their airstrikes, it's incredibly hard to retreat.





■ Above: We're a little indifferent to the maps so far – let's hope the final game has something a bit meatier to offer. Below: These balls – or R.A.P.S – are the bane of *Black Ops III*. They're like the dogs from *Ghosts*, only far, far worse.





BLACK(OPS)SMITH

THE GUNSMITH SYSTEM was locked-out during the beta, but that didn't mean we couldn't get into the 'Personalise' section of the game and customise our guns to our own personal tastes: the customisation system lets you apply a slew of different paintjobs to your favourite weapons and slap letters, motifs, patterns or whatever you want all over them. We imagine once the Gunsmith menu opens up, this is only going to get more comprehensive, too – none of that 'buy a paintjob for £4.50' nonsense here (hopefully).

Hitman

CONCEPT ■ Agent 47 is going back to his roots with large open worlds and seemingly limitless ways of taking out your target, only the release model is something new

One piece at a time

We're not even entirely sure that Io knows how it's releasing *Hitman* later this year, so we'll forgive you if you haven't worked it out yet either. You may have heard that this kind-of reboot of the series is coming out later this year digitally as a full-priced game, but with only some of the content, getting updated through 2016 with additional missions, completing the story and then finally releasing a boxed version of the game once it's all done. But it's not episodic, Io has insisted. And it's not a season pass. Perhaps more importantly there will be no micro transactions after you buy the game and all DLC will be free.

As mentioned, Io has been trying to explain this plan to release the initial part (or perhaps parts) of its game this December followed by additional story missions and content, but it seems there are still big decisions to be made, such as how much content will be in the initial release and how quickly the next rounds will arrive. Io and Square Enix are really feeling around in the dark on this one, as we don't recall anyone attempting this kind of hybrid of Early Access and episodic release models. It does mean though that feedback once the game is launched will lead to changes in later chapters and general gameplay updates if needed.

/// The only reason we would even give credence to such a strange and confusing plan is that the core game that's being produced looks so promising. This is classic *Hitman* gameplay on a much larger canvas. The worlds being developed are promised to be six or seven times bigger than anything in *Absolution* with hundreds of people in crowds to deal with as well as all the usual threats and blockages to your progress. Stages such as the much-discussed Paris fashion show have been described as being like Swiss cheese, with lots of holes that Agent 47 can take advantage of and no dead ends. Truly great *Hitman* missions have always been the ones where we think of a plan of action believing there's no way the developer could have considered our logical leap in the art of infiltration only to find out the game is absolutely ready to support us and make that plan actionable.

Whether that means making use of environmental distractions, taking up disguises in a location that allows us access to interesting mechanics or simply finding a handy perch somewhere to line up a sniper shot, *Hitman* needs to have room for them all, and that's all being promised and demoed already from what we've seen so far. With missions still to be revealed in Marrakesh and an unknown destination in Italy, we're already salivating at the possibilities given the level of detail in the Paris location. What's more, we understand that on top of the regular main-mission updates there will be weekly challenges and online contracts, tapping into the realm of multiplayer experiences like *Destiny* to help foster an engaged *Hitman* community going forward. Throw in user-created contracts too from the previous titles and you have a package that is likely to keep entertaining even if it takes a little while to be completed.

So, if that covers the how and the what, the why remains to be discussed and we have to assume releasing this game is both bold experiment and necessity on the part of Io and Square Enix. For Square, having achieved some success with *Life Is Strange* in the episodic world, testing out something similar with one of its triple-A titles seems like an idea worth attempting. For Io, having seen its team downsized a few years ago, releasing such an ambitious game in a staggered approach, but not watering it down with a traditional episodic structure is also important. There's a hint of Early Access to it all that concerns us with a potential price point still to be finalised, but on the plus side, it does have the potential to solve the modern gamer challenge of squeezing all these top games into our lives. Perhaps *Hitman* can slide into the gaps between games by being released in this manner. All that remains now is to work out how on earth we're supposed to review a game that releases like this…

> "This is a true Hitman fantasy, a highly challenging, thinking person's game where creativity is rewarded"
>
> CHRISTIAN ELVERDAM CREATIVE DIRECTOR, IO

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Denmark
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Io Interactive
Release: March 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded in 1998 and releasing its first game, *Hitman: Codename 47*, in 2000, Io Interactive has a great history of third-person action, like *Freedom Fighters* and even *Mini Ninjas*. The team was greatly reduced in 2013 however leading to a focus on *Hitman* alone.

Developer History

Hitman: Blood Money **2006 [Multi]**
Mini Ninjas **2009 [Multi]**
Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days **2010 [Multi]**
Hitman: Absolution **2012 [Multi]**

High Point

Hitman 2: Silent Assassin remains a high point for the series in the eyes of many fans, establishing the core gameplay mechanics and emergent gameplay we've come to expect from the franchise.



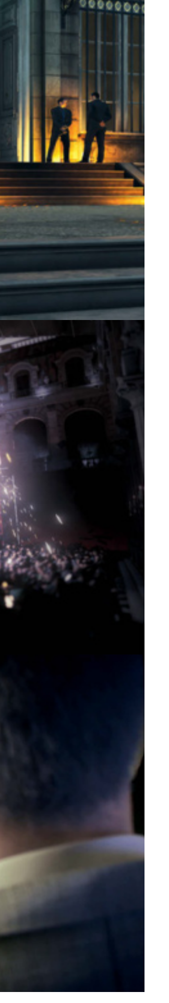


■ Above: There appears to be little restriction on how you choose to take out your target. You can be pretty brazen about your approach if you want to be…



SO MANY BODIES

AS WELL AS promising some of the largest maps and interactive environments Io has ever created, this should also be one of the most NPC-laden games it's ever made, too. The Danish developer has promised up to 300 NPCs will be in each world, in addition to the crowds the game has become so well known for. That's 300 characters in the game who you might be able to interact with or might need to avoid in different situations. That also means there are up to 300 potential Contract targets for that particular bonus mode, which might give you a sense of just how much gameplay you could potentially get out of playing even a fraction of the new *Hitman*.



Repetition is likely going to be a mainstay of keeping *Hitman* interesting as you return to the same mission over and over, changing up your tactics with each visit. Io's challenge is to make sure that remains interesting. Left: Collateral damage is something worth considering when you make a plan to eliminate a target. Are you willing to put bystanders at risk?

Continuing the story from *Halo 4*, there's a whole new range of enemies to take on as both Master Chief and Agent Locke.

SAY HELLO TO YOUR NEW FRIENDS

THE FICTION BACKING up *Halo 5: Guardians* features some familiar faces from the franchise's lore – though if that's actually a good thing or not is still up in the air, as *Halo* spin-offs aren't known for being works of literature.

Nevertheless, players will see the stories of both the Blue Team: John-117; Kelly-087; Linda-058; and Fred-104, as well as the pursuing force of Fireteam Osiris: Locke; Tanaka; Buck (Nathan Fillion's return); and Vale. Both teams have featured in *Halo* before, either in the games themselves or surrounding fiction. It's a nice bit of fan-service, but it's yet to be seen just how much it will impact the actual story – and if those not au fair with *Halo*'s transmedia offerings will actually care.



Right: The multiplayer action seen so far is very similar to the *Halo* we've known for the past decade-and-a-half. An iconic clash between Red and Blue – most people wouldn't have it any other way, even with ironsights added in.



Halo 5: Guardians

CONCEPT ■ The first-person sci-fi shooter as we all know and love it, but with a co-operative focus and almost 'realistic' tweaks to the longstanding formula

Join John, Linda, Kelly and Fred in the Blue Team. No, really

Everything about *Halo 5: Guardians* is geared towards making it bigger – as 343 told us, it's "*Halo* at a much larger scale". Levels are far bigger than before, the campaign takes longer to finish than *Halo 4*'s, you're no longer a lone wolf in the campaign, multiplayer is opened up to more players than ever – it's big, big and big, no doubt. But will this focus on size derail the project? Are the changes and increases in scale being made really beneficial to what was once a fairly straightforward series?

At first glance, *Halo 5* is *Halo* by the numbers – two weapons, taking out alien Covenant forces, a sci-fi hue to everything you look at – but watching 343 play through a campaign mission it became quite clear there have been some tweaks and changes to the formula. Gravity is plenty more realistic, weapons look and feel more like real-world ones, combat looks a lot more like it's from a mix of *Call Of Duty* and *Titanfall* (especially with the new jet pack moves added in).

By no means does *Halo 5* look like a bad game from what we've seen, of course, but it does look like it might have lost some of the uniqueness that made it so special in the past, instead opting to ape the other most popular genre stablemates. But so long as 343 handles this transition well, there's no reason why *Halo 5* can't still be a lot of fun – it's just getting harder to claim it will be as revolutionary as the earlier games in the series were.

Halo 5's campaign will be a lot bigger than that in *Halo 4*, length-wise, as well as featuring two squads of four troops to play through as. Master Chief's Blue Team is being hunted by Spartan Locke's Fireteam Osiris: players will alternate between each squad in a linear fashion as they play through the game, with each squad playable by up to four players. If you don't want to play with others, AI bots with limited contextual orders/control fill the spaces, but 343 has been keen to stress that *Halo 5*'s campaign is made for co-operative play – you'd likely be missing out if you avoid it.

/// Changes for co-op come in the shape of things like bigger levels, containing different ways for squad members to approach conflict. There's also a revive mechanic, so being taken out isn't an instant fail – though you do reset to the last checkpoint if all the squad falls. And if any of your real-life teammates decide to go do something else, the drop-in, drop-out style of play (with dedicated servers, no less) means your game won't be interrupted.

> "We've embraced team-oriented, cooperative play and diversity of player choice by offering players more ways to play, alone and with friends"
>
> JOSH HOLMES 343 INDUSTRIES

One thing that won't be supported in the push to play co-op is splitscreen, with *Halo 5: Guardians* having to drop this feature in the past few months. While fan outcry has been fierce, 343 maintains it can't reintroduce the feature – the AI is too complex, the game has to run at 60fps and environments are too large. Basically, we seem to have reverted back to PSone-era excuses, true as they may be. It's a blow, no doubt, but we're sure 343 will be fighting to make sure online connectivity is the best it can be – and not as shoddy as in the *Master Chief Collection*.

Halo 5: Guardians has some interesting new ideas alongside some questionable changes. There's no way this will be a smooth and easy release for 343 Industries, as *Halo*'s fanbase is too vocal, too fervent to just ignore changes to the standard formula like the studio has made. But those big changes – derivative as they might seem on first glance – might just be a formula for reinvention. The transition may end up being a little rocky, but their long-term impact for the series could be very positive. It's seriously unlikely that *Halo 5* will reinvent the console shooter wheel as its forerunners did, but for all our doubts we can't help but feel like this will be 343's time to shine. The Xbox One likely still has one of the biggest hits of the year on its hands.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: Microsoft Studios
Developer: 343 Industries
Release: 27 October
Players: 1-24

Developer Profile

Named after a character in the *Halo* series, it should come as little surprise that 343 Industries was created with the franchise in mind. After a couple of side-projects, the studio was let loose on *Halo 4* back in 2012 – and once Bungie eventually left *Halo*, 343 became full-time custodians.

Developer History

Halo 4
2012 [Xbox 360]
Halo 3
2007 [Xbox 360]
Halo 2
2004 [Xbox]

High Point

The original revolutionised console shooters, but it was the third that brought everything together. A compelling campaign and fantastic multiplayer, it's yet to be bettered.



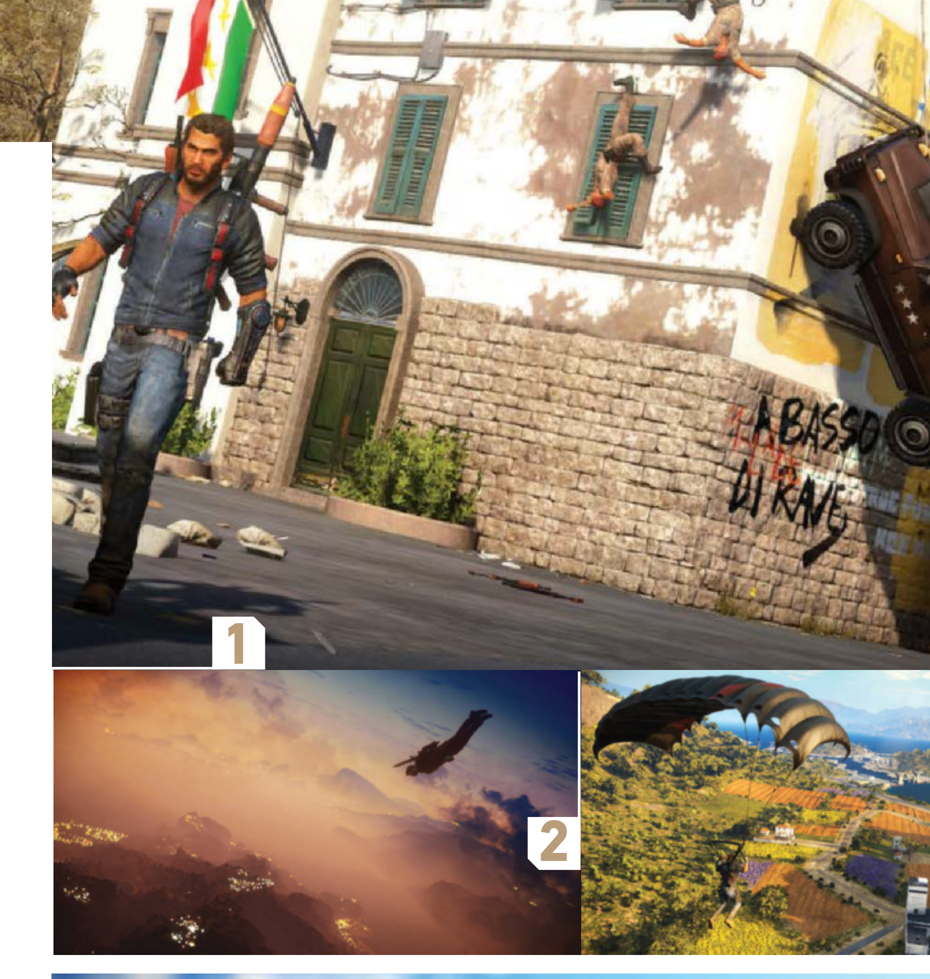


■ Left: There's a lot going on in *Halo 5*'s storyline, but to those who don't care about the lore: you have to kill these guys.

Just Cause 3

CONCEPT ■ Medici Island – Nico's home – has been overrun by a despotic leader, and it's up to the ex-pat to topple the dictator

The stunts are just the start



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Avalanche Studios
Release: December 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded in 2003 by brothers Linus and Viktor Blomberg alongside Christofer Sundberg, Avalanche is both a game developer and game engine creator that specialises in making new IP within its own engines. Based across Stockholm and New York, the studio has a unique trans-Atlantic flavour to its games

Developer History

Just Cause
2006 [PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360]
The Hunter
2009 [PC]
Renegade Ops
2011 [PS3, PC, Xbox 360]
Mad Max
2015 [PS4, Xbox One, PC]

High Point

Just Cause 2 (2010) offered gamers a different kind of anarchy in the open world genre, swapping out the dull concrete of its peers for a lush tropical island.

When you've got an engine that can deal with destructibility and explosions as well as the Avalanche engine can, it makes sense to *really* put that engine through its paces, right? *Just Cause 3* is all about physics-based destruction… it's all about finding the most creative way of blowing things up. We're sure there's going to be an interesting story underpinning the whole product, and we're sure Avalanche is pushing boundaries with its traversal and gunplay, but let's not sidestep the issue: the game is *all* about destruction. Whether you're obliterating gigantic structures with C4 and RPGs or simply tethering things to your car to pull down (a la *Mad Max*), *Just Cause 3* has basically given you an island in the Mediterranean and tasked you with wrecking things until it's liberated.

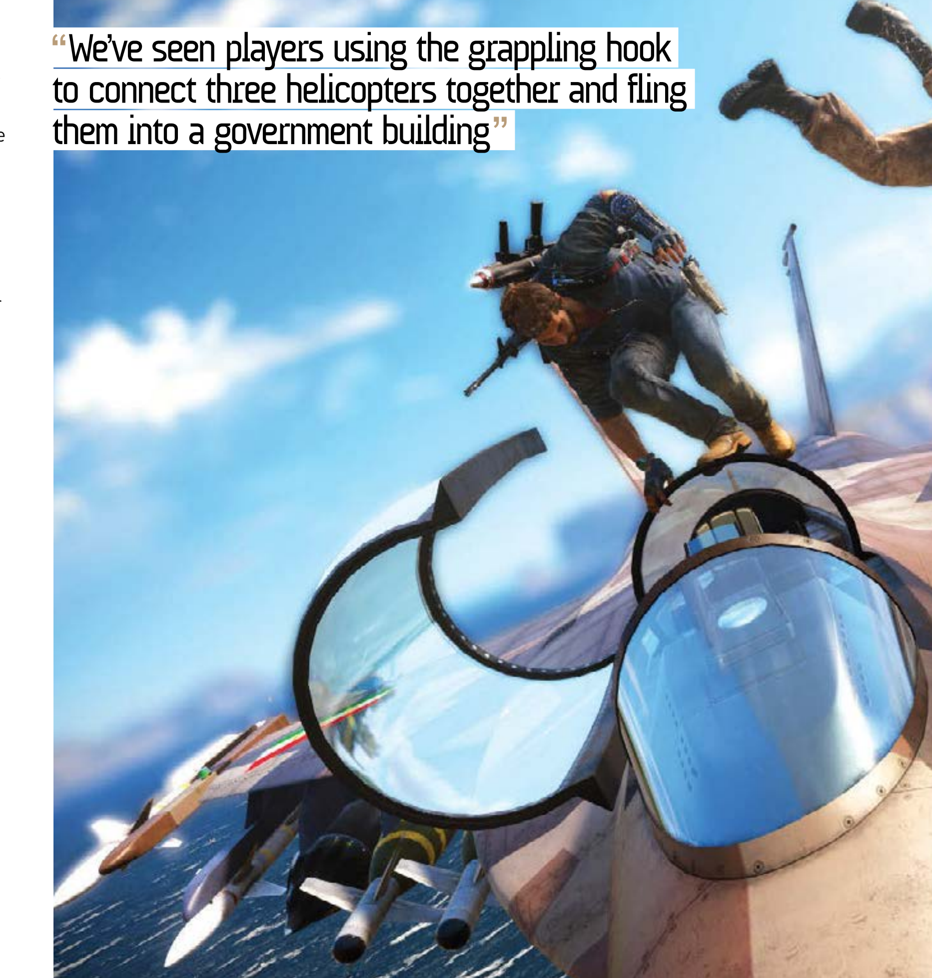
1 YOU CAN GRAPPLE TO PRACTICALLY ANYTHING

Just Cause 3 is introducing a new kind of grappling hook to the series – one that allows for the firing of multiple ropes at once. This frees up the grappling system from the binary way it worked in the second game – if you grappled to something there, you could do little else with Rico. Now, you fire out up to *three* grappling lines and have a more analogue control over how/when you reel them back in. We like to think about that in terms of how many enemy soldiers we can drag along the road behind us, or that we could attach a lethal cocktail of explosive elements to hang from the back of our car… or both.

2 YOU CAN GET TO ANYWHERE YOU CAN SEE

Using the improved grappling hook, you can essentially 'Spiderman' around the map – using zipwires to get from place to place, using the momentum you gain to throw you into the sky, and then using *that* momentum you can unfurl your wingsuit and stay in the air indefinitely. From what we've seen, the wingsuit mechanics look a lot more forgiving and 'floaty' than the ones we're used to from *Far Cry 4*. Whilst Ubisoft's take on the mechanics were realistic for the world of Kyrat, they were too heavy and punishing. *Just Cause 3* isn't concerned with realism, not really, so it can focus on fun over practicality.

"We've seen players using the grappling hook to connect three helicopters together and fling them into a government building"



3 IT'S THE MOST DESTRUCTIBLE GAME IN THE SERIES

The one level the developers are keen to show off at the moment features Rico infiltrating a huge on-shore oil rig and trying to either blow it up, or take someone within the structure down. Thing is, he's never been the most subtle of operatives, and of course the whole thing ends up in a huge explosion. Seeing this all going wrong for our hero is proof that the game has ramped up its destructibility, though: whilst not *everything* can be taken down, the way certain structures can be blasted apart and certain terrain deformed gets us excited: it's a nice prelude to *Crackdown 3*, at least. *Mad Max* uses the same engine and its modular destruction worked well in the open world.



4 THE CHARACTER ANIMATIONS ARE PHENOMENAL

You can't see much of it here, thanks to the static nature of our printed screenshots, but any gameplay video you see of *Just Cause 3* shows off one of our favourite elements of the game: the character animations. Rico's small moments – the wiping of the brow, the brushing off of the lapel, checking the safety on the pistol – have really impressed us. Rico's character model and animation rivals Nathan Drake of *Uncharted* – there's so much attention to detail that we're pretty sure we're just going to leave Rico to idle and watch his animations during the down time between missions when we need to calm down for a bit.





5 YOU CAN USE YOUR VEHICLES AS WEAPONS

If you're anything like us, you're not going to want to clamber into any of the vehicles on offer to get around the island of Medici – because what's the point? You can just grapple-and-wingsuit everywhere, right, like Batman? Instead, the vehicles have a more… creative use. You can customise them to your tastes and load them with fuel or explosives – then plough them into enemies as mobile missiles. You'll have the choice of using fighter jets, planes, ships, exotic cars and motorbikes to use to this end – we've even seen footage of a player using the grappling hook to connect three helicopters together and basically fling them into a government building. *That* is what *Just Cause 3* can do. *That* is the point of the Avalanche engine.



FLOW & TRANSFERENCE

FAITH'S ABILITIES have changed a bit since we were first introduced to her – maybe because of her untrained skills, she can now equip herself with a selection of gadgets and peripherals, to make her more mobile. One such item is a mag rope that can be launched from her right glove – think of it as a grappling hook that allows her to zipline from roof to roof. This makes Faith a more versatile character to control and cuts down on travel time significantly, which is an important decision to make in the open world that *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst* has opted to tackle.

VISION OF THE FUTURE

TO HELP you navigate the modular open world that Faith has to explore in *Catalyst*, 'runner vision' makes a return. Where – in the original game – this manifested itself in the visual language of the levels (interactive objects would be painted red, etc), *Catalyst* takes it a step further. The new game prefers to lay down a 3D GPS route that acts more like a waypoint tracker than an actual part of the city's make-up. Instead, there will be more colour-coded items (rather than just red), and as such the city will look more like, well, a city, and less like a series of levels or zones.

Mirror's Edge: Catalyst

CONCEPT ■ A prelude to Faith's story we got to know in the first *Mirror's Edge*, this prequel follows Faith Connors as she presses through the 'Glass' city

It Gives You Faith In Humanity

C*atalyst* takes you back to the very beginning of Faith's crusade against capitalist injustice and the dystopian leadership of the clinical (but unethical) city she lives in – you'll be a novice freerunner, dropped into the city of Glass. The idea behind going down the prequel route and stripping Faith of her insane traversal skills is to make us, as players, grow with her, getting more au fait with her world and her body as she grows to understand them more herself.

Faith is more than just a physical vessel, though – she embodies the idea of change, the idea of hope, the idea of… well… faith. She is the eponymous catalyst that forces the world to change around her, and her impulsive personality and fiery attitude inspire the other data couriers and resistance members she meets to pull their fingers out and to actually *do something* about the ever-increasing class divide that's about to shatter the city of Glass into fragments.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Sweden
Publisher: EA
Developer: DICE
Release: 26 February 2016
Players: 1-4 (TBC)

Developer Profile

DICE is actually short for EA Digital Illusions Creative Entertainment, and was founded in 1992 – and made pinball games for the first five years of its life. DICE now employs roughly 550 staff.

Developer History

Pinball Dreams
1992 [Amiga, SNES, MS-DOS]
NASCAR Heat
2000 [PlayStation]
Battlefield 2
2005 [PC]
Mirror's Edge
2008 [PS3, Xbox 360, PC]

High Point

The original *Mirror's Edge* used Unreal Engine 3 as DICE's own Frostbite engine was still in development. It took gaming's pet genre – the platformer – and rejigged it to suit a first-person perspective.



ANGELIC PAIN?

■ EVERY FEARLESS protagonist needs an equally charismatic and ostensibly evil counterweight, and that comes in the form of Gabriel Kruger in *Catalyst*. Kruger is the head of the dystopian organisation that's taken over Hope's home city, and the reason she's resorted to direct action. He's been engaging in ethically questionable genetic research on the people that live in his ward, and he's managed to wrangle himself an unquestioning force in the form of a private military firm. He's the stuff of cartoon villainy – Handsome Jack by way of Dr. Doom – and we find that very enticing in a game that otherwise takes itself incredibly seriously.

"Inspired by the breath-taking, lush environments of Nothern Scandinavia, traverse nature's true beauty as well as the dangers it has in store"
UNRAVEL WEBSITE

Unravel

CONCEPT ■ Yarny – a small creature made of red yarn – explores the world around him, using the twine he's composed of to create lines you can traverse with

Pulling at your heart's strings

The emotional metaphors *Unravel* is built on might seem a little ham-fisted at first – 'It's about a thing made of string that unravels as things get more difficult for it, how twee!', you may scoff. But there's actually a lot more going on underneath all that fabric than meets the eye.

First off, it's published by EA – and EA actively sought out Coldwood Interactive to get the game on its roster. It's a passion project for the publisher that has been receiving criticism for its focus on milking the multi-million dollar franchises on its books dry: it's a human side of the juggernaut that's been a long-time coming. Then there's the actual developmental philosophy that *Unravel* has been constructed around: creative director Martin Sahlin has stated that he sees yarn as 'a symbol of love', a physical interpretation of the bonds that we as people have between each other.

Yarny represents a personal journey everyone has: the journey to mend bonds that have become broken or frayed. Sahlin doesn't want to make the game's story about any one theme necessarily – instead he sees all the narrative beats as 'notes' that we as players can weave together ourselves 'to make [our own] music'. It all comes to fruition as a physics-based puzzle-platformer that works by getting the player to immediately understand how everything works based on its visual presentation. It's grounded in reality, so a water level, for example, will have interactive objects that'll float. You can tell that from the bottles, sponges or buoys attached to them. It's then up to us to read the levels and construct ways for Yarny to progress, even if it's using his own body parts in the process.

Sahlin hopes that making the game's levels this readable will undercut the traditional downside of puzzle-platformers: the trial-and-error. Sahlin wants players to be able to 'retell' levels themselves, so it's safe to assume we're going to get the environmental storytelling skills used in these 2D levels that we're more used to seeing in the open-world 3D games the generation has been forthcoming in providing so far. This means the levels initially have simple concepts – a sea level where you're trying to avoid getting washed away, or a frozen field level where you're hiding from two crows trying to peck away at you – but the puzzles within the levels slowly take on a more complex form as time goes on.

Unravel is due to release in the first quarter of 2016's financial year – we look forward to watching Yarny evolve and grow as the date draws nearer.

■ The game's aesthetic puts us in mind of *LittleBigPlanet*, with *Limbo*-like puzzles – platforming fans take note.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Sweden
Publisher: EA
Developer: Coldwood Interactive
Release: 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

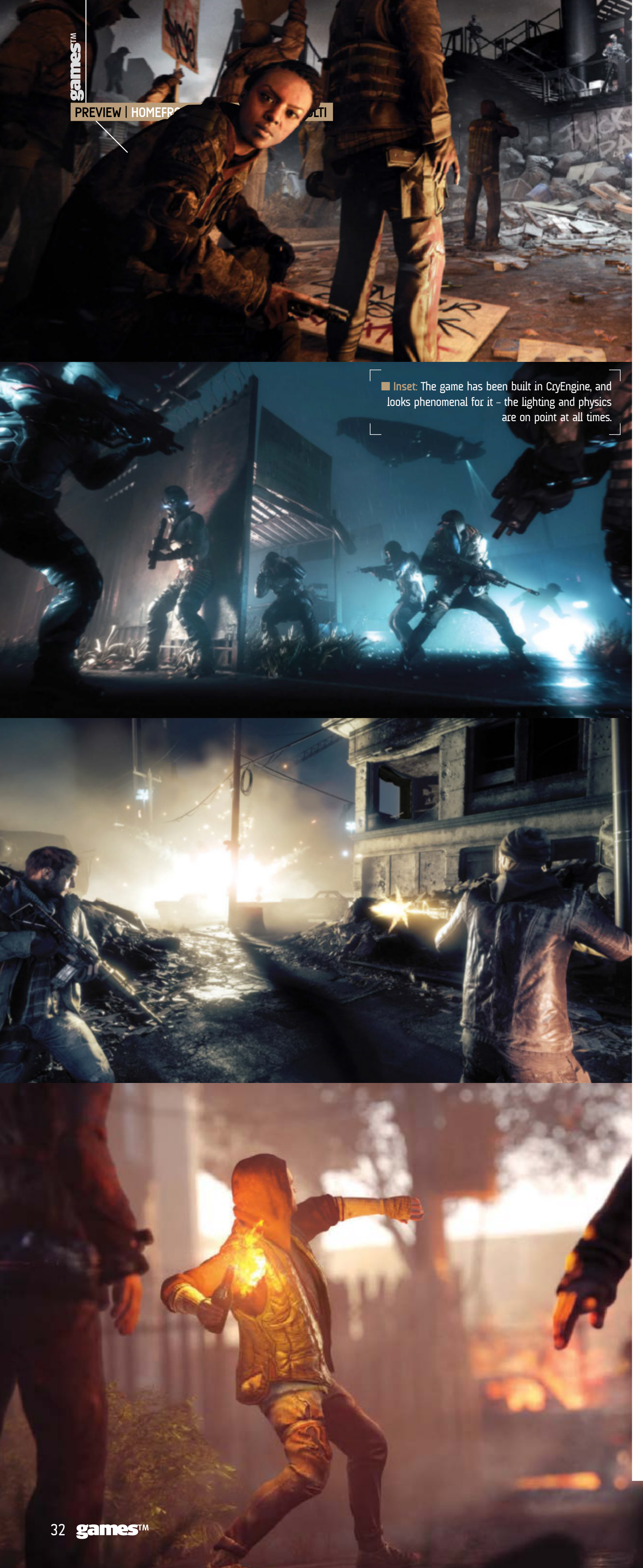
Coldwood Interactive has been a pretty small player in the games industry until it debuted *Unravel* on stage at E3 earlier this year – thanks to studio head Martin Sahlin and his nervous energy, though, the studio made a pretty big name for itself admirably quickly.

Developer History

The Fight: Lights Out **2010 [PS3]**
Battlefield: Bad Company 2 (PC port) **2010 [PC]**
Ski-Doo Snowmobile Challenge **2009 [PS3, Xbox 360, Wii]**

High Point

The PC port of *Bad Company 2* got Coldwood Interactive the attention it deserves from DICE, who put the studio in touch with EA – the publisher that took a chance on *Unravel*.



Inset: The game has been built in CryEngine, and looks phenomenal for it – the lighting and physics are on point at all times.

Homefront: The Revolution

CONCEPT ■ It's 2029 and the Greater Korean Republic has taken the entire Western side of America. As Ethan 'Birdy' Brady, you join the resistance in Philadelphia – keen to overthrow your new masters

When speculative fiction meets the open world…

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin:
UK
Publisher:
Deep Silver
Developer:
Deep Silver Dambuster Studios
Release:
2016
Players:
1-TBC (multiplayer)

Developer Profile

Kaos Studios was working on *Homefront: The Revolution* before the company went bust – that's when publisher Deep Silver swept in to save the day, funding the continued development of the game and resurrecting the studio as Dambuster. The team is au fait with CryEngine and is made up of veteran developers and programmers – just because Dambusters is a new studio doesn't mean *Homefront: The Revolution* is going to be an amateur effort from this team.

Homefront: The Revolution **takes place four years after the original game was set, and observes a United States under the governance of North Korean forces.** When *Homefront* was first released, there was an underlying narrative to the game based on real-world tensions – the isolationist North Korea was the new 'red threat' to America.

Now the game's under a British developer, and now that North Korean tensions have been rising in light of the nation's attacks on South Korea, there seems to be more to this story – more speculative fiction, more real-world tensions involved. We chatted to *Homefront: The Revolution*'s senior narrative designer, CJ Kershner, about what he hopes to achieve with the game.

This game's development was turbulent – did many of the original team work on the sequel?
As the team exists now, I think it actually might just be me. The team in Nottingham traces their lineage back to Free Radical Design. They worked on *TimeSplitters* and *Second Sight*. They did the multiplayer for *Crysis 2* and *3*. They've been working on *Homefront: The Revolution* since it was a THQ project. I think it might be that I'm the only person who was on the original.

Were there any lessons from how *Homefront* was received that were applied to *The Revolution*?
[With] the original game, the idea was really strong, the emotion was there… but that feeling of being on the backfoot, being a guerrilla fighter, wasn't. It felt like other big-budget military shooters of the time. Our decision to take it open-world, to really bring that feeling of being a guerrilla fighter and being fragile to the fore, was a big split.

> "Our decision to take it open-world, to really bring that feeling of being a guerrilla fighter, was a big split"
> CJ KERSHNER SENIOR NARRATIVE DESIGNER, DAMBUSTER STUDIOS

We rewrote the backstory, too. The first game started with the present day and extrapolated out in the future of like, if these things happened here's how North Korea could take over the United States. We've gone back into the 20th Century and started rewriting history and saying well, you know, if this point diverges and if this point diverges, where does that lead us? It fosters some really interesting questions about the way things did go down versus the way they could have.

How do you create progression and pace for the player, given the open-world nature of the game?

It's a challenge working on any open-world game, you are relying very heavily on your systems: on the AI that powers both the friendlies and the enemies, the civilians, the vehicles and drones; on the way that the levels are constructed… on all that sort of stuff.

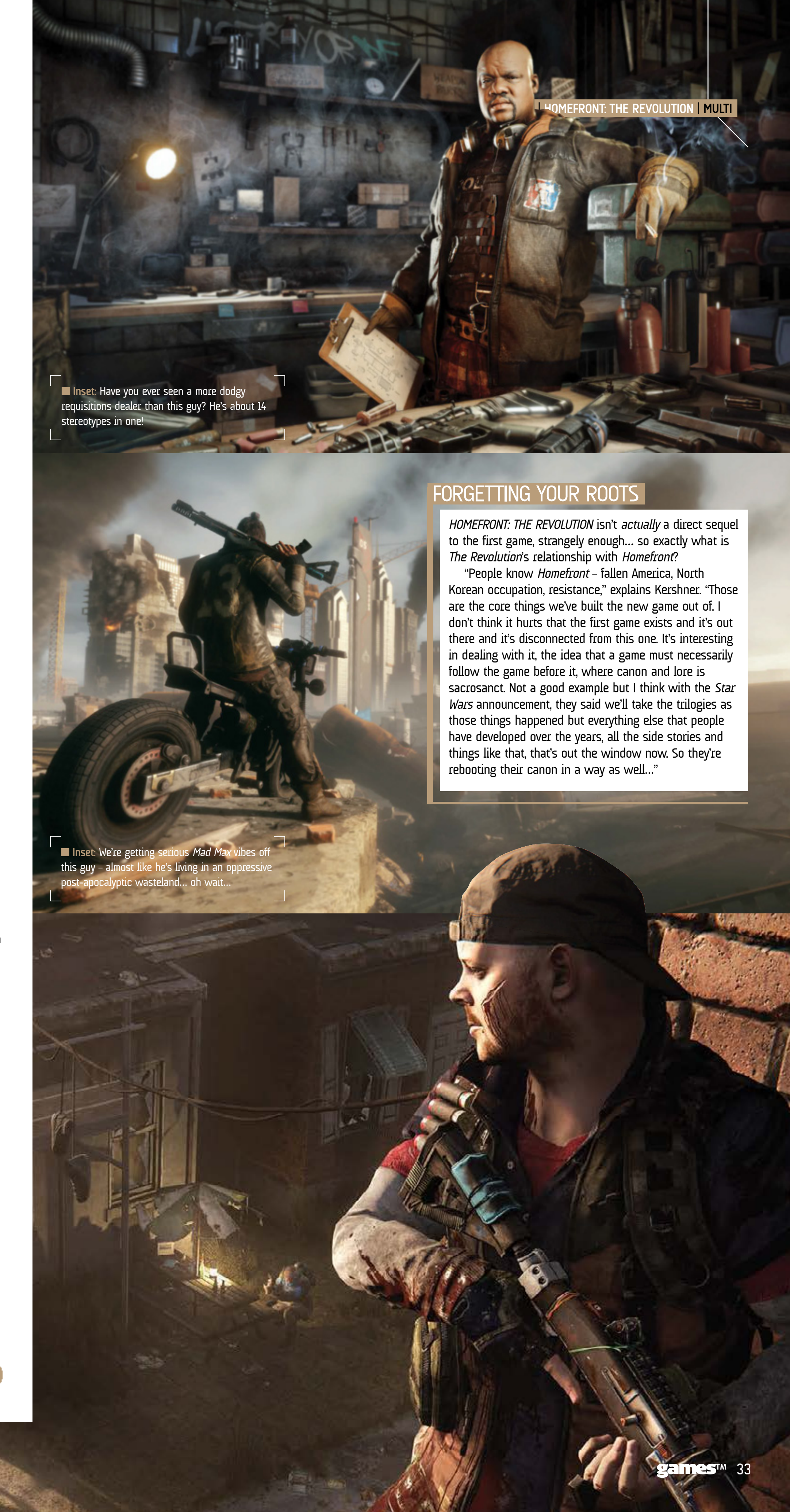
Often you do have to relinquish some of that authorial control that you would normally take for granted to those systems. We can adjust the sliders here and there, and tweak and balance them, and they're still in the process of being tweaked and balanced and probably will be up until the final days before ship, but when it comes to the freeform player experience of the open world, we can create the systems, we can put them in the blender together and see how they bounce off one another… but really, you accept there will be a degree of entropy on every play-through.

On our more high-impact cinematic story missions, we do maintain a bit more control over things, but it's almost impossible to know where the player is going to be at any given time and that's something we've had to accept. But it's also one we can embrace because really, anything can happen at any time when you're on one of those missions.

In terms of the storyline, the narrative and the emotions, what have you learnt from first game?

The first game was very graphic in its depiction of the occupation. You had families being separated, parents being shot in front of their children, mass graves. You won't find that in this game, but what you will find is a much more omnipresent threat and a feeling of oppression.

One of the districts we have is our Yellow Zone. So the Red Zone is the bombed out outskirts of the city that's off limits, and it's a very lawless running street battle sort of environment. You take those same troops and drones and you put them in a place where people live and where you, as the player, can't carry a gun in the open and the dynamic changes drastically. The drones are still going around and scanning but it's not scanning to call in reinforcements, it's scanning to check IDs and so it's two very different flavours.



Inset: Have you ever seen a more dodgy requisitions dealer than this guy? He's about 14 stereotypes in one!

Inset: We're getting serious *Mad Max* vibes off this guy – almost like he's living in an oppressive post-apocalyptic wasteland… oh wait…

FORGETTING YOUR ROOTS

HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION isn't *actually* a direct sequel to the first game, strangely enough… so exactly what is *The Revolution*'s relationship with *Homefront*?

"People know *Homefront* – fallen America, North Korean occupation, resistance," explains Kershner. "Those are the core things we've built the new game out of. I don't think it hurts that the first game exists and it's out there and it's disconnected from this one. It's interesting in dealing with it, the idea that a game must necessarily follow the game before it, where canon and lore is sacrosanct. Not a good example but I think with the *Star Wars* announcement, they said we'll take the trilogies as those things happened but everything else that people have developed over the years, all the side stories and things like that, that's out the window now. So they're rebooting their canon in a way as well…"

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PS4, PC, Xbox One
Origin:
Poland
Publisher:
Devolver Digital
Developer:
Flying Wild Hog
Release:
2016
Players:
1-4

Developer Profile

Established in 2009 by a trio of Polish developers, Flying Wild Hog got the industry's attention by creating its own proprietary engine – the Road Hog Engine. The studio proceeded to build *Hard Reset* in the engine, a game that was as much a tech demo as it was an actual release.

Developer History

Hard Reset
2011 [PC]
Shadow Warrior
2013 [PS4, Xbox One, PC]
Juju
2014 [PC]

Details

The first *Shadow Warrior* of the remakes was met with solid reviews and favourable reception from consumers – mainly for the way it handled first-person combat.

Shadow Warrior 2

CONCEPT ■ Set five years after the events of the first game, the demon forces of Zilla return… and it's up to Lo Wang make sure they don't make it very far

Lo Wang's back, and harder than ever

■ The other characters haven't got names quite as memorable as Lo Wang, unfortunately – rather they appear to you as simple anonymous ninjas.

So, the best thing about *Shadow Warrior*'s reboot was the weaponplay, right? We can all agree on that. *Shadow Warrior* was as much a love letter to the games it came from as it was a game in its own right – it took all the best things about the 3DRealms era of first-person shooter games and spun them into a new web: one that looked better, handled better and was teeming with new ideas, but still *felt* like the old *Duke Nukems* or *Dooms*. It was flush with fancy new ideas, and it was one of the few games out there that could do the whole self-effacing humour thing positively (rather than just pointing out its own flaws).

But where do you go next? When you innovate like that, can you really step up *again* with your next release? Well, Wild Hog certainly seems to think so, and as such has taken the most ambitious route it could when thinking about its next step forward… implementing four-player multiplayer. With the swordplay we got used to in *Shadow Warrior* and the amazing way the hand-to-hand combat was crafted, we were at first cautious of the idea.

■ It's nice to see that Wild Hog hasn't toned down the bloody violence *at all* going into the sequel – if anything, we're expecting it to be worse.

"Shadow Warrior 2 will expand on and improve every element that made the original so unique"
MICHAL SZUSTAK FLYING WILD HOG

Shadow Warrior was great because it played on that ninja-focused power fantasy the series is known for, and it was exceptionally gratifying in the way it made you feel empowered: you were never frustrated with how the combat scaled, but it was always hard enough to make your victories *matter*. So by allowing up to four people to run rampant through hordes of demons, we thought it might over-balance the combat.

We were wrong. It's not that the difficulty curve has changed much at all, but rather that the levels are more open, less linear. This – coupled with the way you can now wall-run and jump – makes for a more frantic experience, and the procedurally-generated waves of enemies work out how many people are playing and adopt their attacks and wave formations consequentially. Think *Left 4 Dead*, with ninjas. Every level – except ones *directly* tied into the narrative – will be randomly generated in this fashion: throwing buildings, enemies, weather conditions and loot drops at you at random.

If that wasn't enough, *Shadow Warrior 2* is dropping an additional 70 weapons into the mix, giving you more variation in the way you take down the rampant demon menace. Guns, swords, fists, kunai – it's all there, all feeding into that broader ninja fantasy. You can also collect and install gems into your equipment, giving them buffs and elemental properties: this is the B-movie version of *Dying Light* – but that is by no means a criticism.

"Mother Russia Bleeds is an unrelenting, ultra-violent Beat 'Em Up, brimming with hard-hitting action"

MOTHER RUSSIA BLEEDS SITE

Mother Russia Bleeds

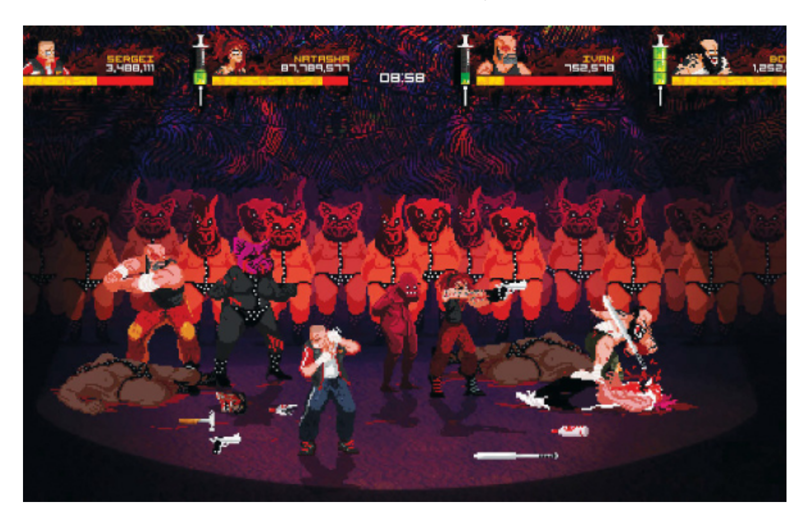
CONCEPT ■ In an alternate Eighties USSR, a crew of four imprisoned street fighters fight for their lives on the streets, whilst staving off hard drug addiction

Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll

The most unrelenting, violent beat-em-up we've seen take to the screens in recent years, *Mother Russia Bleeds* isn't scared of controversy. It's heavily inspired by *Hotline Miami*, if you wanted a sense of where this preview is going already, and doesn't shy away from 2D pixel gore, bad language, bad taste or gritty weirdness.

You play as an anti-hero that's addicted to a peculiar new super-drug that's been manufactured by an alternate USSR government – using prisoners for experimentation. This hallucinogenic concoction is incredibly addictive, and the four central characters of the game are all hooked. The game – a side-crolling beat-em-up that's taken cues from *Double Dragon* and *Scott Pilgrim Vs The World: The Game* – can therefore get away with a lot of weird visual trickery. You're playing as an ultra-violent thug who's on a semi-permanent out-of-this-world trip, basically – so think of the art direction as something like *A Clockwork Orange* meets *Requiem For A Dream* and you're in the right area.

The game can be played with up to three other players, so we're hoping that hints at pretty insane and *massive* bosses that you've got to tackle as a team. Think of the boss potential you can have when all your protagonists are absolutely out of their minds on narcotics… it certainly frees up the artists and their creative hands, right? But it's not all about going mad or going too violent and too gory. The game was created, apparently, to 'do something different, more powerful, with in-game violence'.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, PC
Origin: France
Publisher: Devolver Digital
Developer: Le Cartel
Release: 2016
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Le Cartel is formed by ex-Ubisoft game designer Frédéric Coispeau – one of the creative minds behind *Just Dance 2014* and *Just Dance 4* – who teamed up with web designer Alexandre Muttoni. Le Cartel was formed specifically to make *Mother Russia Bleeds*, and hired two new staff (programmer Florian Reneau and composer Vincent Cassar) to this end.

■ There is a lot of potential for this game to go a bit *too* weird and intentionally gritty… we hope it treads on the side of caution.



But we're concerned by that statement – we've seen one level set in a sex club that saw the protagonists pushing through a sea of faceless goons, all identical, as you bash their heads in with various crunchy moves. Bar regulars look on, undeterred, and pixel-art strippers continue to gyrate and grind. *Hotline Miami* never did that, it didn't need to. For a game that riffs so heavily on Dennaton's classic, we're worried *Mother Russia Bleeds* *might* not have quite grasped the subtlety of its predecessor.

But we haven't played the full game yet, and it might have some fantastic narrative justification for the scene – maybe one of the characters you play as has some deep-rooted insecurities about his sexuality, and as he hallucinates these manifest as semi-naked gimps that he needs to banish as those more comfortable with their sexuality look on. That'd be new, that'd be different. We trust Devolver and the games it chooses to publish, though, and we're sure this story of psychotic vengeance will be something more than just an 18+ *Streets Of Rage*.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

MIGHTY NO. 9

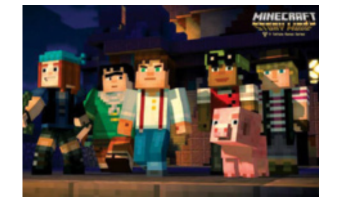
Format: Multi
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: Comcept
ETA: 2016



DELAYS SEEM to be going hand-in-hand with games bound for the next generation, but we can only hope it has a positive impact on Kenji Inafune's *Mighty No. 9*, the spiritual successor to *Mega Man*. While the game is currently playable from front to back, Comcept is using this extra time to squash a few pixelated bugs and to ensure that this side-scrolling platformer is as optimised as possible across all platforms – here's looking at you Wii U.

MINECRAFT: STORY MODE

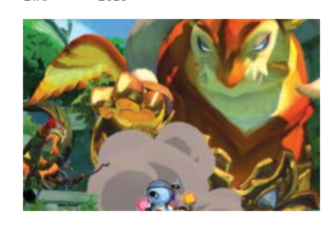
Format: Multi
Publisher: Telltale Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: November 2015



OF ALL of the licences Telltale has attempted to tackle over the years, we had plenty of reasons to believe that *Minecraft: Story Mode* will be its toughest challenge yet. But, truth be told, it actually looks like it could be Telltale's most entertaining game to date. With a ridiculous story revolving around a newbie *Minecraft* player, Jesse, trying to stop the world from breaking apart with, more importantly, companions that include a talking pig.

GIGANTIC

Format: Xbox One, PC
Publisher: Motiga
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2015



GIGANTIC IS proving that, with a little ingenuity and commitment, the MOBA format can translate perfectly over to console gamers and the gamepad. With a delightfully appealing art style, not to mention its fast and frantic action, *Gigantic* is proving to be another success for Xbox One's ID@Xbox platform. But you don't have to take our word for it, a beta is due to roll out soon, so get online and get signed up, you won't regret it.

RED AWAKENING

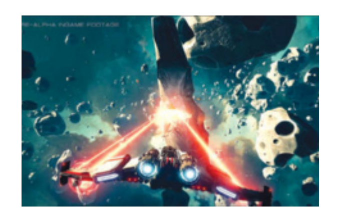
Format: Multi
Publisher: Domino Effect
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



AFTER TWO years of self-funded development, *Red Awakening* stormed through a Kickstarter campaign to get back on track for its 2016 release date. With a focus on team-based gameplay, *Red Awakening* draws from the likes of *TimeSplitters 2* and *Thief* for its challenging 5v5 stealth combat, not to mention a little dash of *Titanfall* thrown in for good measure thanks to the fun parkour movement system the FPS action is centred around.

EVERSPACE

Format: PC
Publisher: Rockfish Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



ARE YOU bored of waiting for *No Man's Sky*? *Everspace* could fill that gap. It's an all-new single-player focused space shooter, combining roguelike elements and non-linear storytelling to create a new breed of space games. Perhaps it's the stunning interpretation of the galaxy that Rockfish has created that has us so enthralled; developed using Unreal Engine 4, we can't wait to see more.

ARK: SURVIVAL EVOLVED

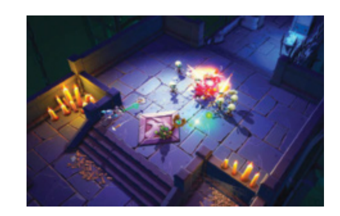
Format: PC, Xbox One, PS4
Publisher: Studio Wildcard
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



THERE'S A severe lack of good games offering prehistoric action and adventure, and that's a great shame. The likes of *Dino Crisis* and *Turok* might have let you hunt dinosaurs, but *Ark* will let you saddle them up and ride around in beautiful Unreal Engine 4 rendered open worlds. *Ark: Survival Evolved* is the dinosaur game we've always dreamed of playing, and better yet, it'll be launching in early access on Xbox One soon.

SUPER DUNGEON BROS!

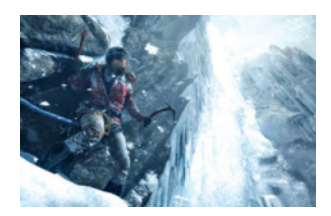
Format: PC, Xbox One, PS4
Publisher: React Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q4 2015



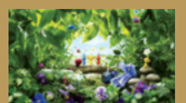
WE WERE getting a little worried about *Super Dungeon Bros!* after an alpha hands-on – it seemed a little slow and clunky for our liking. Thankfully, the rock 'n' roll dungeon crawler is moving nicely through development, with another hands-on opportunity revealing refined mechanics, tougher puzzles and new ways to mess with your friends to steal that all-important treasure.

RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER

Format: Xbox One, PS4
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
ETA: 13 November 2015



DESPITE THE inaccurate reports, it looks as if *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* will indeed feature some form of multiplayer experience when it launches in November. While the competitive side of the game is yet to have been revealed, Microsoft promises that "more info… including how players will be able to extend their single-player campaign and compete with their friends" will be revealed all in good time.



ANNOUNCED – Pikmin 4

It sounds as if *Pikmin 4* is not only in development, but fairly close to completion! No word on whether it will release for Wii U, 3DS or the mysterious NX though, but our guess would be this is a Nintendo next-gen launch title.

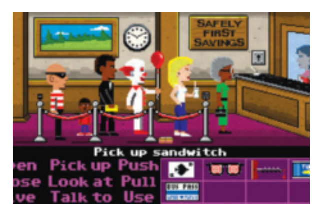


CANCELLED – Moonrise

State Of Decay developer Undead Labs has cancelled its free-to-play creature collector *Moonrise*, due to lack of popularity, as it struggled through alpha on Steam. A disappointing outcome all around.

THIMBLEWEED PARK

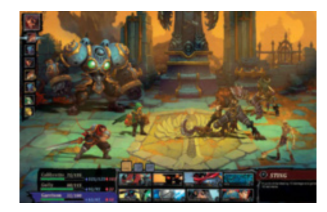
Format: PC, Xbox One, iOS, Android
Publisher: Ron Gilbert & Gary Winnick
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



THE BEST way to think of *Thimbleweed Park* is if you imagine heading to a car boot sale, rifling through the belongings of *Monkey Island* creator Ron Gilbert, only to stumble across a LucasArts adventure game that you've never played before. Resolutely oldschool in its design and execution, *Thimbleweed Park* is a call-back to a style of games we just don't see anymore. Check out Gilbert's dev blog for a great look behind the scenes.

BATTLE CHASERS: NIGHTWAR

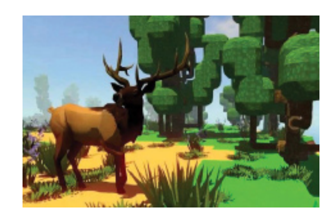
Format: PC, Mac
Publisher: Airship Syndicate
Developer: In-house
ETA: TBC



IF YOU'VE been wondering what Vigil's co-founders, Joe Madureira and Ryan Stefanelli, have been up to since the *Darksiders* studio closed down, look no further than this resurrection of *Battle Chasers*. This is an RPG inspired by the console greats, featuring deep-medieval dungeon-diving and turn-based combat in the classic, and almost forgotten, JRPG style. *Battle Chasers* stormed through its Kickstarter target, and is well worth keeping your eyes on.

ECO

Format: PC, Mac
Publisher: Strange Loop Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: TBC



ECO IS a wonderful concept, thankfully backed up by some pretty neat systems and mechanics. It's a survival game on a global scale, where players need to work together on live 24-hour servers to keep an entire world from falling apart. Hundreds of thousands of simulated plants and animals each live out their lives – growing, feeding and mating – and it's up to you and your friends to ensure the natural balance doesn't fall apart.

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2

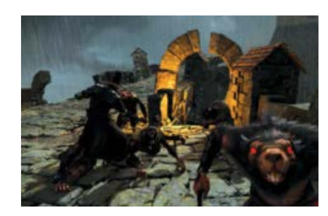
Format: PC
Publisher: Larian Studios
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



DIVINITY: ORIGINAL Sin was critically acclaimed when it launched in 2014, but this Kickstarter sequel is hoping to take the turn-based RPG to the next level. With a million dollars behind it already, Larian Studios looks to be making the best kind of sequel – it's bigger and deeper than before. It's games like *Original Sin 2* that ensure the indie scene is once again responsible for creating the best hardcore RPGs out there.

WARHAMMER: END TIMES – VERMINTIDE

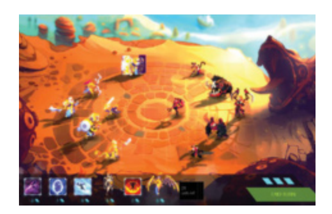
Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Publisher: Games Workshop
Developer: Fatshark
ETA: Nov 2015



SOMETIMES THERE just isn't enough time in the day to get together with your buddies to play a little Warhammer, which is why we always appreciate the opportunity to put away the ruler and pick up a gamepad. *Warhammer: End Times – Vermintide* is an interesting take, a four-player cooperative adventure set during the end times of the fantasy world. Ubersreik looks gorgeous, too.

DUELYST

Format: PC, iOS
Publisher: Counterplay Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q1 2016



WE'VE HAD a close eye on *Duelyst* for some time now, and it's great to see such a fun and competitive concept – think chess, except instead of wooden pieces, it's a band of magical marauders – actually play as nicely as it looks. The beta is running now and our playtests reveal a game with plenty of potential. With games lasting just five-to-ten minutes, it's easy enough to dip in and out between games of *Hearthstone*.

BARD'S TALE IV

Format: PC
Publisher: InXile Entertainment
Developer: In-house
ETA: TBC



YOU'VE PROBABLY heard about *Bard's Tale IV*, right? It's from the creators of *Wasteland 2*, InXile Entertainment, returning to the franchise in celebration of 30 years since its debut. What you might have missed was the news that legendary developer Chris Avellone will be joining production to design an entirely new dungeon. *Bard's Tale IV* continues to look like the sequel we've waited 27 years for.

VA-11 HALL-A

Format: PS Vita
Publisher: Sukeban Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q4 2015



INCREDIBLY BIZARRE, strangely addictive, *VA-11 HALL-A* is a cyberpunk bartender sim unlike any other. You read that right; it's through conversations with the punk denizens of Valhalla, that you'll begin to unfold a deep story set in a in this neon-soaked bar. Like *Papers Please*, story is at the forefront of the experience here, but from what we've seen already, it looks like a must-play.



HOW S.P.E.C.I.A.L. IS FALLOUT 4?

We find out the TRUTH about the biggest game of the year and reflect on what has made the series such a success


Nuka
Cola

Much like the series as a whole, *Fallout 4* is a game that straddles the past and future, which may go some way to explain the mixed reaction it seems to be getting from some quarters. It's a game that's bridging the gap between one of the experiences of the last generation, and a new era of hardware that has yet to fully establish its identity. And it is somewhat ironic that a series that has always warned of the repetitious nature of history when it says 'War, war never changes', should find itself once again having to convince fans that it has what it takes to deliver the *Fallout* experience the hardcore expect.

Looking back now, it seems ludicrous that anyone would have doubted *Fallout 3*, but that was the situation Bethesda was in as it took over the franchise for the first time, and it's worth remembering that this is only the studio's second game in the franchise. *Fallout 4* should represent Bethesda establishing its vision, cementing its hold on the licence having done so well with *Fallout 3*. It will continue to recognise the heritage of the past and make a space for what this series can be in the future.

But there's a passion and devotion to the wastelands of *Fallout* that rivals any fandom out there, and it's sceptical; something that fans of other series might do well to learn from. Sure, many will have snapped up those Pip-Boy preorders pretty quickly (and who can blame them?), but that hasn't saved *Fallout 4* from its critics. For many it feels too much like an incremental step for the series; not enough of a generational leap. While we might choose to quibble with that analysis, we were interested to hear from one of *Fallout*'s original creators for his view on what it takes to make a sequel in this franchise.

"For RPGs it's all about the next adventure, it's not necessarily about a reimagining of technology or anything like that," Feargus Urquhart, Obsidian CEO, tells us. "I don't think that every iteration of a role-playing game needs to be something completely new. I think people play role-playing games for the story and characters, and you eventually have to move on, but I don't think that there was anything that we were really trying to do that different that we ever talked about or wanted to do differently between *Fallout 1* and *Fallout 2*." Urquhart was a division director on *Fallout 1*, producer on *Fallout 2*, and got the chance to work on the series again with Obsidian on *Fallout: New Vegas*. As we reflected on the origins of the series, it's clear that *Fallout* remains a deeply important game to the veteran developer.





THE ADDITION OF A COMPLETE HUD REDESIGN WHEN YOU ENTER A PIECE OF POWER ARMOUR IS A NICE TOUCH. WE'LL BE CURIOUS TO SEE IF THAT'S SOMETHING THAT LOOKS DIFFERENT BETWEEN ARMOUR BRANDS TOO.

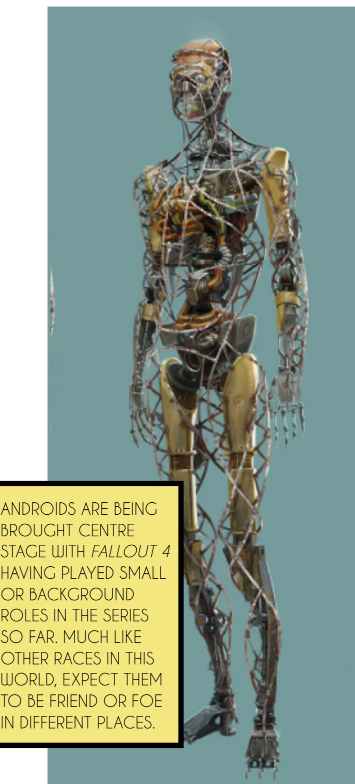
"SUPPORTING PLAYER CHOICES WITH A FULLY-VOICED HERO IS POTENTIALLY A VERY BIG CHANGE FOR THIS SERIES"

But with his insight in mind, it begs the question, what are the core tenets of a *Fallout* game? If we shouldn't expect monumental change then these at least must be embellished and built upon, so what are they? "Adventuring in a world that feels like what people in the Fifties thought the future would look like, then dropped a bunch of nuclear warheads on it," states Chris Avellone, former colleague of Urquhart's at both Interplay working on the original games and a co-founder of Obsidian. Avellone is also credited as

the author of the *Fallout Bible*, a lengthy tome that chronicles the timeline, factions, vaults and rules of this world. He adds a second important pillar too; "Quest and exploration freedom that, at the least, can be accomplished by a stealthy, combat, and "talky" character. Often, many more options are presented."

Interplay founder Brian Fargo agrees that player choice is absolutely key. "One of the edicts from the original *Fallout* was that you could solve every problem either by brute force, by trying to charm them or by trying to sneak your way around," he tells us. "So, to take those three options and apply them to every possible scenario, I think that was a core tenet from a design perspective of what *Fallout* was supposed to be." One example was that even the final encounter with The Master in *Fallout* could be talked out.

So how does *Fallout 4* build on player freedom of choice? Well, for a start we need only look at a total lack of level cap in the game, supported by an augmented perk system that could potentially mean 275 levels of enhancement through the game and any subsequent DLC, depending on how levels and upgrades are handled post-launch. That level of player character customisation is extraordinary, and a huge change from *Fallout 3*'s original 20 levels and hard ending to the story missions. With no level cap also comes no game-ending climax to the narrative. Whatever it is that *Fallout 4* has you building towards as the sole survivor of Vault 111, their tale won't end with it. What's more, those 275 perk levels point to incredible degrees of skill customisation through the game. Immersing yourself in the Commonwealth could be even more rewarding than any of this series' previous worlds. »



ANDROIDS ARE BEING BROUGHT CENTRE STAGE WITH *FALLOUT 4* HAVING PLAYED SMALL OR BACKGROUND ROLES IN THE SERIES SO FAR. MUCH LIKE OTHER RACES IN THIS WORLD, EXPECT THEM TO BE FRIEND OR FOE IN DIFFERENT PLACES.





How S.P.E.C.I.A.L. was conceived

Fallout's original developers reflect on the famous character system

The SPECIAL system for determining the skills and specialities of your character in *Fallout* has been a staple of the series, but as we discussed it with Feargus Urquhart, the original game's division director, we were surprised to find out it was originally going to use a licenced system instead.

"When I was first involved with *Fallout 1* it was a GURPS game, so it was using the GURPS role-playing system and that was licensed from Steve Jackson Games." GURPS stands for Generic Universal RolePlaying System and was developed for tabletop RPGs, offering a universal character system that could be used across genres. However, the pitch to Steve Jackson Games to allow the system to be used in *Fallout* wasn't as successful as the team might have hoped.

"He really just said, 'I have a problem with the violence there and I'm just not going to approve that'," Interplay founder Brian Fargo reveals. "I knew that if a licensor was going to take us off course that it was going to be a problem for the overall games. So I went ahead and terminated that relationship and said 'Let's just do our own system'."

"Then I worked with Tim [Cain] and Chris Taylor to come up with the SPECIAL system and we did all of that together," adds Urquhart.

And so the Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence Agility and Luck system was created and has remained a core pillar of the *Fallout* experience, as well as a new standard for the medium.

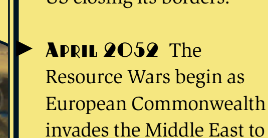


The post-apocalypse in brief

The wasteland backstory is a deep one, but here are the key dates you should know



March 2052 A virus known as the New Plague breaks out, leading to the US closing its borders.



April 2052 The Resource Wars begin as European Commonwealth invades the Middle East to secure oil.

2054 Vault construction begins as part of Project Safehouse.

2059 The first AI is born.

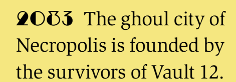
2060 Oil fields run dry, ending the European-Middle Eastern War.

23 October 2077 The Great War begins as weapons are fired by nuclear powers around the globe. It's unclear who fired first. In Massachusetts the Sole Survivor and their family flee to Vault 111 for shelter.



2083 The ghoul city of Necropolis is founded by the survivors of Vault 12.

2091 Vault City construction begins with the Vault 8 GECK activated.



2103 The Master successfully creates the first Super Mutants having experimented with exposing humans to FEV (Forced Evolutionary Virus).

5 December 2161 The events of *Fallout* begin as the Vault Dweller is sent out to find a new water chip for Vault 13.



2165 The village of Arroyo is founded by the Vault Dweller.

25 April 2239 Rivet City founded on an Aircraft Carrier in Washington DC.

25 July 2241 The events of *Fallout 2* begin as the Chosen One takes the mystic test and later sets out in search of a Garden Of Eden Creation Kit to save Arroyo.

2242 Two androids are built by the Institute, named Armitage and A3-21.

2255 The Brotherhood Of Steel arrives in the Capital Wasteland, lead by Owyn Lyons. They establish the Citadel on the grounds of The Pentagon.

13 July 2258 The Lone Wanderer of *Fallout 3* is born.

17 August 2277 *Fallout 3* begins as the Lone Wanderer sets out in search of their missing father James, leaving Vault 101.

2277 *Fallout 4* begins as the Sole Surviver leaves Vault 111 after 200 years.

19 October 2281 The events of *Fallout: New Vegas* begin as the Courier seeks Benny to get their revenge having been shot in the head.

2377 The estimated year the USA will be habitable again.

» Player choice is further reflected in the gargantuan script Bethesda has reportedly put together for this game. With your player character being given a voice for the first time in franchise history, you might think that some of your control for moulding and shaping your hero has been taken away from you, but some 111,000 lines of dialogue have been recorded for the game, which according to Bethesda is more than *Fallout 3* and *Skyrim* combined. That would indicate that not only is *Fallout 4* an immense new location to explore, but that there's a good chance player agency will be well-supported by dialogue options throughout the game.

It's a tough balance to make, between player choice and offering that compelling story Urquhart mentioned earlier, that in many ways is more important than graphical leaps or major changes to gameplay mechanics. Offering your freedom within the world of *Fallout 4* to develop your character while also supporting those choices with a fully-voiced hero is potentially a very big change for this series. It could help add another layer of richness to the wasteland and a greater degree of connection to this world than we've ever experienced before.

> "This new setting for Fallout appears to be a community past the point of mourning for the world that was lost"

And that's been a secret to this game's success from the beginning, giving players things to connect to over and over again. "The world felt deep, it felt rich, and it reacted to you in many ways – which in turn, makes your character's actions feel more impactful, heightening the experience," says Avellone. It ties back into one of those core tenets we discussed earlier, a vision of the future through the lens of Fifties, cold war America. And even in this area, *Fallout 4* appears to be excelling. The very premise of this story has you live in that world starting on the day the bombs fell on 23 October 2077. It's an opportunity to see the pre-apocalypse world like we've never had the chance to do before. It should also help us to feel the loss of that world even more acutely than we might have previously. We'll get to see their television, listen to the radio, look at the cereal and furniture. We'll get to turn away a salesman and interact with Mr Handy.

What's more, it's very likely that the whole prologue will be an extended character creation setup, melding narrative with the all-important construction of our hero. This is something uniquely



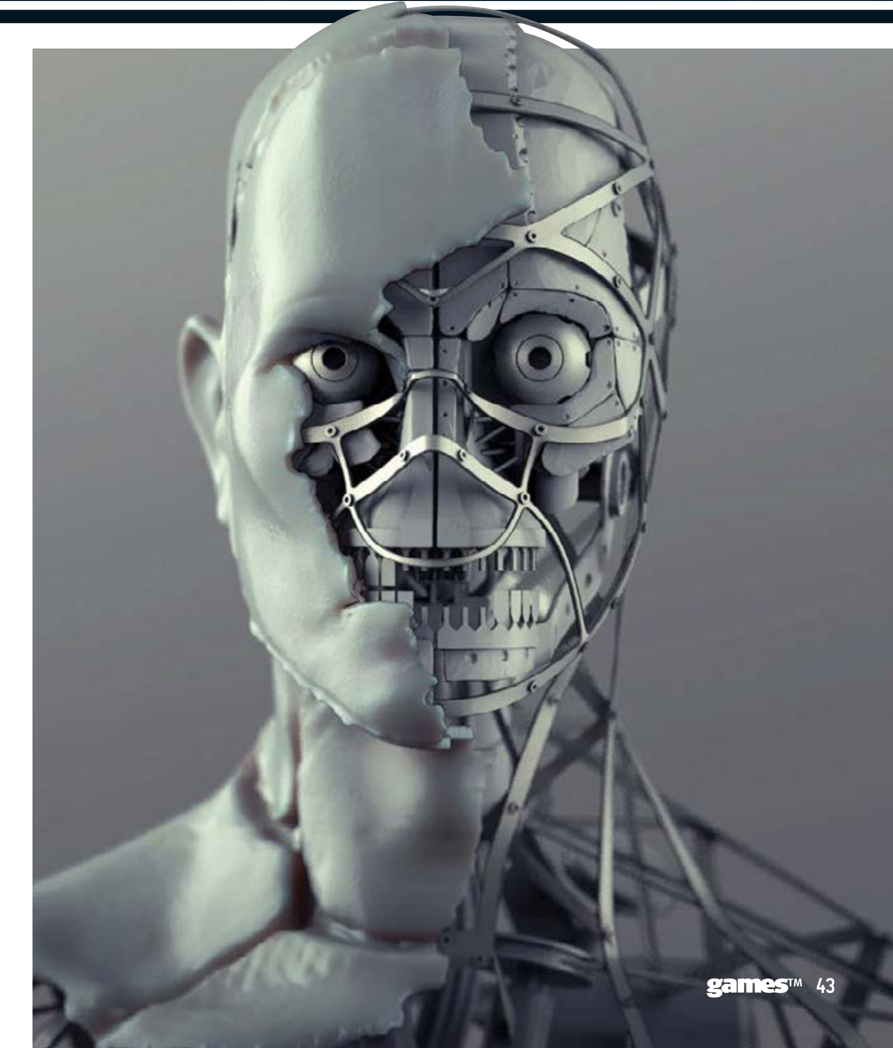
THE AMOUNT OF SMALL DETAILS IN ANY GIVEN AREA IS PRETTY MIND-BLOWING AND THE QUALITY OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL TEXTURES WE'VE SEEN SO FAR IS IMPRESSIVE. GRAPHICALLY, IT SEEMS TO BE ON TRACK.

COMPARED TO THE CAPITAL WASTELAND, THE BOSTON LANDSCAPE APPEARS TO HAVE FARED PRETTY WELL DESPITE A NUCLEAR WEAPON BEING DROPPED NEAR IT. THIS DENSE CITYSCAPE SHOULD OFFER A NICE CHANGE OF PACE.

Bethesda-like, having experienced the childhood of The Lone Wanderer or the prisoner transport of *Skyrim*. We've had a glimpse at this with the trailers so far, but there's much still to reveal. What's more the player characters of *Fallout* thus far have always either grown up in vaults or in the wasteland itself, so what will this new insight (and 200 years of bed rest) give us that we've not experienced before? This new setting for *Fallout* appears to be a community past the point of mourning for the world that was lost, but that may not be the case for our hero. How will they adjust and interact with others?

Supporting characters in *Fallout* are vital to the experience. Speaking to Urquhart about his return to *Fallout* with *New Vegas*, he picked this element out as one of his proudest achievements with the game. "It was always our intention – and we do this in all of our games, but in *Fallout* we did it even more – to have interesting characters that make sense and have interesting motivations, that people can relate to. And it seems that particularly in *Fallout: New Vegas* people really see people like Mr. House as these real entities and not just figments of our imagination."

From friends to enemies, the characters in *Fallout* always have motivations that explain and to some degree justify their behaviour. Having that connection and being able to side with who you choose is an important element of choice that fuels so much of *Fallout*'s great water-cooler moments. The classic example from *Fallout 3* was choosing to help the people of Megaton or destroy the town at the behest of Allistair Tenpenny. *Fallout 4* appears to be placing even more emphasis on personal relationships, not least thanks to that enormous new script and fully-voiced player character. »





The best of the Vaults

There are 122 public Vault-Tec shelters in the Fallout universe, but here are our favourites



Vault 12

LOCATION Bakersfield, California

EXPERIMENT Study the effects of radiation exposure by not allowing the Vault door to close.

RESULT A new race, known as ghouls, is created through mutation as a result of radiation exposure. The city of Necropolis is formed on the site.

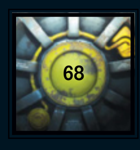


Vault 42

LOCATION Unknown

EXPERIMENT No light bulbs in the Vault were over 40 watts, meaning inhabitants lived in permanent low-light. This would likely lead to eyes adjusting to the conditions, but the psychological effects would also be tested.

RESULT Unknown



Vault 68

LOCATION Unknown

EXPERIMENT Of the 1000 people who entered the vault, 999 were men and one was a woman. One of the more extreme social experiments devised by Vault-Tec, it is a partner vault to 69, which explored the opposite gender makeup.

RESULT Unknown



Vault 77

LOCATION Unknown

EXPERIMENT Inhabited by one man and a crate full of puppets as an investigation of isolation.

RESULT Vault dweller invents a community with the puppets, but after a 'murder' by a Vault Boy puppet the dweller escapes as a 'fugitive'.

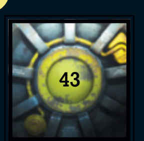


Vault 21

LOCATION Las Vegas, Nevada

EXPERIMENT Vault inhabited by compulsive gamblers with all conflicts resolved with games of chance.

RESULT Vault taken over by Robert House after winning a game of blackjack, converted into hotel and casino for inhabitants of New Vegas.

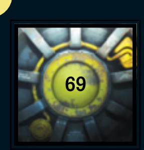


Vault 43

LOCATION Unknown

EXPERIMENT Inhabited by 20 men, ten women and a single panther, this vault is only briefly mentioned in a Penny Arcade comic strip, but given the elaborate nature of some of the vaults its makeup is not entirely bizarre.

RESULT Unknown



Vault 69

LOCATION Unknown

EXPERIMENT Of the 1000 people who entered the vault, 999 were women and one was a man. One of the more extreme social experiments devised by Vault-Tec, it is a partner vault to 68, which explored the opposite gender makeup.

RESULT Unknown



Vault 103

LOCATION Capital Wasteland

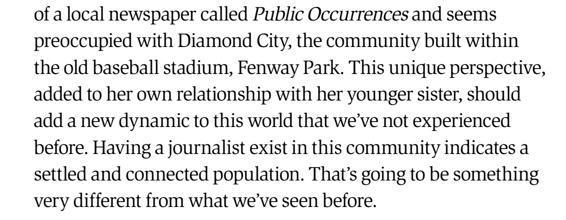
EXPERIMENT Vault includes a cloning lab and the position of Overseer is given to a man known to have cancer.

RESULT What happened is unclear, but the only survivors of the vault are clones of a man named Gary, all of whom are hostile to non-clones.

"We were just doing what we did when we were playing or making the pen-and-paper RPGs"

» There will be 12 companion characters in the game for you to meet, with Dogmeat and Mr Handy included. Of the rest, all of the human characters can be romantic interests for your character if that's something you choose to pursue. As an example of the level of attention given to companions, Dogmeat is a good place to start. You may be interested to know, for example, that your canine companion is actually fully motion-captured by one of the development team's own dogs, named River. Moreover he could be one of the game's most useful additions as Bethesda has confirmed that Dogmeat cannot be killed, so he may prove a handy exploration tool and defensive measure.

Another confirmed companion is Piper, whose back-story speaks to the degree with which the Commonwealth has adjusted and renewed itself since the Great War. Piper is the editor of a local newspaper called *Public Occurrences* and seems preoccupied with Diamond City, the community built within the old baseball stadium, Fenway Park. This unique perspective, added to her own relationship with her younger sister, should add a new dynamic to this world that we've not experienced before. Having a journalist exist in this community indicates a settled and connected population. That's going to be something very different from what we've seen before.



It speaks to the constant growth and world-building of the *Fallout* series, a process that has not stopped from the moment the first game was released. As Avellone's *Fallout Bible* attests, this is now a universe packed with its own history, factions, alliances and possibilities. Strange then that none of that was really on the mind of the game's original creators. "I'd like to say that we were thinking about that, but that would be disingenuous," admits Urquhart as we discuss how the original games helped establish this world. "To set the scene or set the stage correctly, this was all so early in all of our careers. We were just having fun making games. It's not that we weren't thinking of the future, but we were just doing what we did when we were playing or making the pen-and-paper RPGs."

Those tabletop traditions still permeate much of how Fallout operates, and there's much more of that for Bethesda to explore. Even when Obsidian was approached to take on *New Vegas*, a great deal of freedom was given to the developer to mark out its own extensions to this franchise and the canon of the world. "The great thing is that Todd Howard [Bethesda producer] is awesome and so is Todd Vaughn [Bethesda vice president of development], and it always sounds arrogant to say this, but there was no one else they would ever have had do this because

DIAMOND CITY SHOULD PROVE TO BE AN INTERESTING AREA TO VISIT. THIS COMMUNITY BUILT WITHIN THE WALLS OF FENWAY PARK BASEBALL STADIUM APPEARS TO HAVE CUT ITSELF OFF FROM THE SURROUNDING POPULATION. WHAT MIGHT IT BE HIDING?



WEAPON CUSTOMISATION AND BUILDING IS LIKELY A WHOLE NEW LEVEL OF TIME SINK FOR FANS OF THE SERIES AS ALL YOUR GATHERING AND PILFERING PAYS OFF INTO SERIOUS UPGRADES TO YOUR GEAR.

they trusted that we would just do it," Urquhart tells us. "They knew that we understood it, that a lot of us had created it and we were very conscious of what *Fallout* was to them now. And that's not just how bleak *Fallout 3* was, they had some ideas about certain timeline stuff that was important to them." It also helped that an East and West coast split was established between Bethesda's in-house titles and this spin-off, giving the *Fallout* veterans a piece of their old landscape and the New Californian Republic to play with. It leaves plenty back in the East to explore too and there have been plenty of hints in previous titles of there that might go.

We know from *Fallout 3* that what was known as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has now become home to an organisation known as The Institute, stockpilers of advance technology and seemingly the creators of the androids known as Synths (met as enemy combatants in trailers so far). Working in opposition to the Institute is a group known as the Railroad, inspired by the underground railroad network famous for freeing slaves in the 19th century. It's their wish to free sentient androids from the hands of the Institute, which would suggest that not all Synths you meet in the Commonwealth are necessarily enemies. Both sides of this argument will already be familiar to those who completed the Replicated Man quest in *Fallout 3*.

Another group mentioned in Bethesda's previous game is the Synth Retention Bureau, a division of the Commonwealth police tasked with capturing escaped Synths. The android Harkness who is at the centre of the Replicated Man mission is himself a Synth who worked as a hunter of his own kind for the SRB. Beyond these region-specific groups we can expect to see plenty from the stalwart factions of the wasteland. The Brotherhood Of Steel are known to operate in the area and even command an airship named the Prydwen. The trailers would suggest it can be destroyed and brought down in *Fallout 4*. Where the Brotherhood exists, the Enclave are rarely far behind, while super mutants, ghouls and many more are all likely to play their part somewhere in the Commonwealth. As with previous *Fallout* games, picking your alliances is likely to be one of your toughest challenges. »

The tale of the other Fallout 3s

Bethesda's last Fallout wasn't the only attempt to get a third instalment off the ground



The tale of the lost *Fallout* sequel is one well known to *Fallout* fans. Van Buren was the project, started by Black Isle Studios, the original team behind the game. But as we discuss the history of *Fallout* with Feargus Urquhart, a key player in the series he reveals it wasn't the first attempt at a sequel.

"There was actually a *Fallout 3* before there was a Van Buren," he reveals. "One of the weird coincidences is that the 3D engine that we were looking at the time, because Interplay didn't really have a cohesive 3D engine, was a 3D engine called NDL, and NDL oddly enough was either purchased or merged into Alienbrain and Gamebryo, and then Gamebryo is basically what Bethesda used as the basis of their engine for what then became the actual *Fallout 3* that they made. That was just a funny thing."

Interplay was struggling, so the project was shelved in favour of *Iceland Dale*. A little while later, another opportunity arrived and Van Buren was born. "Where Van Buren came from was that we started to work on *Baldur's Gate 3* and so we were developing an internal engine for it," says Urquhart. "Unfortunately Interplay lost the D&D licence and so it could not be *Baldur's Gate 3*. That's when the team transitioned to making it *Fallout* and that's where Van Buren came from and, as the team was moving forward, that's actually when I and then the other guys left Black Isle."

According to Chris Avellone, one of the designers on the project, it had a lot of cool ideas in place before it died. "Well, there would be a new character archetype: Science Boy for intellectual-based player characters (I was inspired by *Lucifer's Hammer*). Ghouls and super mutants would have been player characters and have their own arcs in the world – including their own territories and 'nations'. You would have seen how GECKs were made, tried to save ZAX from the computer equivalent of Alzheimer's, and many old ghosts from the Pre-War past would have emerged as new threats (not the Enclave, but something worse)."

Many of the team got the chance to invest some of those ideas into *Fallout: New Vegas* with Obsidian. "Suddenly, all these memories of Van Buren flooded back, but now they had 7 years to 'incubate'," says Avellone. "We took what we thought worked, altered other bits, brought back some old locations, resurrected some old factions, and hit the ground running."

As for Boston and the region around it, the city appears to have fared pretty well all things considered. Many of its buildings are still standing and a community has grown within it to quite an advanced extent. While the prologue for the game depicts a bomb falling close to the city, ground zero for this impact is not within the centre of Boston. The region, now known as the Glowing Sea, remains heavily irradiated and in a nice new touch for *Fallout 4*, it will occasionally generate radiation storms that will spread out from the region and affect other local areas.

And then of course there's the fact that you'll be able to build your own settlements in the game, attracting other wanderers to make their home in the accommodation you build. As you collect materials on your travels you can return to this shanty town for a bit of post-apocalyptic interior design, turning another patch of irradiated dirt into a basecamp to be proud of. As well as building and defending this community you'll also be able to establish trade from this town to others with Brahmin caravans taking goods back and forth between communities. It's another level of connection to this world for us all to sink our teeth into. It also happens to be the area of the game that's most impressed Avellone. "The locations are beautiful, and I love the player character base designs I've seen – it's a great next evolution in having a 'house'."

"AS YOU COLLECT MATERIALS YOU CAN RETURN TO THIS TOWN FOR SOME POST-APOCALYPTIC INTERIOR DESIGN"

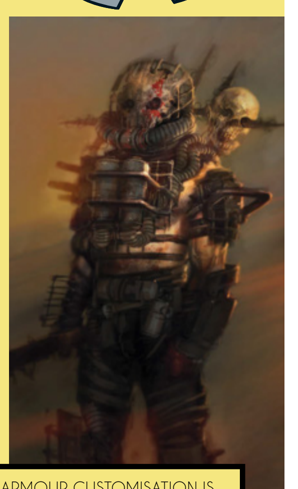
The crafting and building mechanics of Fallout 4 are the standout additions to this iteration of the series, bringing greater importance to the kleptomania most of us have experienced in the wasteland and giving us ways of benefiting from the trinkets we collect on our travels. As weapons are upgraded and modified we can begin to match our loadouts more closely with our perks and SPECIAL levels, bringing greater continuity to our approach to the game. But while weapon modification could well see us approach combat in new ways, that's not the only improvement.

VATS (Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System) has been Bethesda's greatest contribution to this series in many respects, honouring the pen-and-paper traditions *Fallout* was built upon with its skill-based probability while also honouring their own preference for first-person combat that doesn't fall into the basic FPS format. With *Fallout 4* that's being modified a little. VATS no longer freezes time for instance, rather slowing it down to a crawl. It means that you'll need to make decisions about how you shoot faster, but it could also mean that patience will open up better percentage chances of hits to vital areas on an enemy's body.

Outside of VATS, levels, stats, gear and probability will still play their part in FPS combat, but our proficiency as players will also be given more credence. There's been some speculation as to whether the shooter expertise of MachineGames or id Software may have been brought to bear in this area, but regardless, it should mean more aggressive FPS approaches could be rewarded and a little less back-peddling while shooting can be expected. Another pleasing addition is the chance to activate a critical hit by filling up an action points bar. This will be another important feature to think about when taking on groups of enemies, especially if there's a super mutant or Deathclaw about.



CRITICAL HITS CAN NOW BE ACTIVATED AT YOUR DISCRETION, WHICH SHOULD PROVE USEFUL AGAINST HUGELY POWERFUL ENEMIES LIKE DEATHCLAWS. SAVING YOUR CRITICAL HIT UP FOR THE RIGHT MOMENT IS A NEW TACTICAL DECISION YOU NEED TO MAKE.



ARMOUR CUSTOMISATION IS ONLY ONE ELEMENT OF YOUR DEFENSIVE CAPABILITIES IN *FALLOUT 4* AS BASIC ARMOUR CAN ALSO BE LAYERED OVER YOUR CLOTHING.

So, *Fallout 4* is not without its advancements and augmentations, even though they have proved challenging to spot on the surface for many. Graphically it may not be the leap forward some might have hoped for, but the level of detail, colour and texture quality, as well as the character models in the game do all appear to be greatly improved on *Fallout 3*, and a good bit better than *Skyrim*. What Bethesda has doubled down on is that core element of story and connectedness that Urquhart and Avellone identified as being vital to this series. There's a massive new landscape to uncover, more NPCs to meet and several times more dialogue to work your way through if you want to. What's more, the refinements to the levelling system and dropping of a level cap means you should be able to express your own playing style with even more freedom than before. All told, it's been speculated there could be more than 400 hours of gaming packed into this release, which is intimidatingly large for any RPG.

And as close as the original team clearly still feels to the *Fallout* titles, there's a sense that they believe that the licence is in the right hands now. "One of the things that I like is that they do a really good job with taking ideas that would normally be mundane and giving them a lot of personality," Fargo tells us. "Everything from character creation with you looking in the mirror with somebody looking over your shoulder choosing your character, to even using the crafting table and the way that works. Even with *Fallout 3*, starting off as a baby, it was very, very clever stuff. I always tip my hat to the way they take the mundane and make it much more interesting." And with Urquhart admitting to us he already preordered his Pip-Boy edition of the game too, all that's left for all of us to do is await the launch of *Fallout 4* on 10 November.


THE REAL COST OF FREE-TO-
If the future of gaming is free, what are the issues the business model's foremost developers are having to overcome?
48 games™



We've all become jaded cynics, and it's easy to see why. While society as a whole tumbles ever closer towards a permanent state of eye-rolling – one cleverly doctored image of a BBC news ticker at a time – it's gamers in particular that are finding their trust egregiously chipped away by the machinations of the big publishers.

It's hard to maintain your resolve in the face of faceless NPCs in *Assassin's Creed: Unity*, of content torn from a game only to be fed back to us as pre-order bonuses and DLC or even of full-priced retail games that find themselves dulled by the inclusion of a quiet open-palm begging in the form of needless microtransactions. Gamers are right to cast doubt over such blatant money-grabbing schemes, but such criticism comes with a fault. Now it's become hard to find much positivity, with some even arguing the likes of CD Projekt Red's lauded approach to post-release DLC – namely a guarantee of a ton of free extras, and a couple of expansion packs *worth* paying for – has been met with scepticism: was this nothing more than a positive PR stunt to boost consumer confidence, and therefore the initial sales to go with it? Perhaps so.

Free-to-play suffers a similarly unshifting stigma, but again it's not without merit. These days we're able to point to a number of free-to-play games where we're not always being nickle and dimed out of our cash – the likes of *Team Fortress 2*, *Hearthstone* or the behemoth that is *League Of Legends* as quick examples – yet for all the positive proof that free-to-play games live up to the definition, there are considerably more examples otherwise. "It's possibly not helped by the fact that on mobile free games are kind of ostensibly money-grabbing," says Chris Wilson, lead developer on the popular *Path Of Exile* and one of the co-founders of its developer Grinding Gears Games.

"The scepticism these days seems to be related to the fact that you get a lot of free games that offer advantage for money," he says. "They have to sell something so gameplay advantage is the thing to sell." But Wilson is critical of such a method, believing that a game can't sustain a player base – something that online games like *Path Of Exile* sorely need – if it's always locking players out of content when they don't pay. "The example we often give is if you're playing chess and one company is offering you the ability to reskin your chess set – you know, to spend a lot of money to get gold or diamond pieces – whereas the other company offers the ability to just repurchase your queen if she dies, the second one is corrupting the gameplay quite a lot more. And for our game being super competitive and hardcore, the players wouldn't tolerate that."

According to Todd Harris, co-founder of HiRez Studios, the developer behind third-person MOBA *Smite*, the concern surrounding free-to-play derives from the business model's relative newness. "A lot comes down to what you grew up with," he claims. "To many older gamers and many working within the game industry, free-to-play seems scary because it is disruptive. But look at the most popular games on PC: they are free-to-play. Look at the most popular games on mobile: they are free-to-play. I think that eventually top console games will be free-to-play as well. So the majority of gamers have already voted with their actions that they embrace free-to-play. As more quality free-to-play titles come out I do think even more gamers will be turned around."

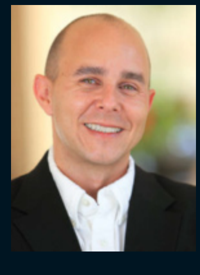
In fact, it's only over the last few years that free-to-play has really begun to rise outside of the mobile gaming or the Asian markets, and so a lot of gamers are still only just beginning to understand »



“We try not to shove the word ‘free’ down their throat as much as we used to”
Chris Wilson, Grinding Gears Games

League Of Legends is criticised for locking new characters out unless you pay, but a weekly cycle of Champions and earned in-game currency provides opportunity to use them.





Trion Worlds’ CEO Scott Hartsman thinks of players that pay to play as patrons, rather than merely consumers, supporting future development.



Lord Of The Rings Online is still very much active, and well-loved by those willing to give it a try.



Path Of Exile has amassed a huge fanbase as a result of its fair monetisation systems.

» what exactly free-to-play really means. Even so, HiRez’ Harris admits that there are some “awful free-to-play games out there”, adding that the competitive nature of *Smite* means the developer must avoid “pay-to-win or pay for power” elements. The problem with free-to-play games, it seems, is that it’s easy for developers – particularly on mobile – to hook players into its systems early on, coaxing those ingrained with the gameplay into paying once it finally unveils just how long a certain building might take to construct or how difficult a particular boss is to defeat. These games inevitably hit a barrier, and few are willing to pay to unlock the power they need to continue.

However, while this is the case in the West, in Asian markets – where the model has had many more years to standardise – free-to-play works quite a bit differently. “They kind of have their own separate economy,” says David Brevik of the differences in free-to-play between East and West, “because what is acceptable to sell and what the players want to buy there is very different than the situation here. It’s okay that they go out and they buy some of the really awesome items or whatever, it’s just socially acceptable.” Brevik’s work on *Marvel Heroes 2015* has turned it into a significant free-to-play title, one that he and Gazillion were keen to ensure became an international game. “The important part is to separate them,” he laughs, “and make sure the two don’t meet – because then you’ll have a lot of irate players if they’re all on one particular realm!”

Brevik tells us that it was necessary to make *Marvel Heroes 2015* a global product to enable as low a barrier to entry as possible; the higher the number of players, the more potential there is for revenue through microtransaction purchases. Much like *Path Of Exile* and *Smite*, however, Brevik insists that any kind of pay-to-win feature does not make for a good free-to-play title: “I’m very opposed to buying power,” he says, “that’s not something that I’m particularly fond of. So I felt like a lot of the stuff that we were going to do was maybe some time-saving things as well as cosmetic stuff.”

There’s an insistence among developers of free-to-play games that to help release the business model from its embedded cynicism there has to be a focus on making your free game fun to play in the first place. It might seem obvious but can be, especially in the mobile space, all too rare. Developer Firefly Studios knows this very well with the MMO-like take on its castle-building strategy franchise, *Stronghold Kingdoms*. Much like those derided mobile games, *Stronghold Kingdoms* relies on timed construction and limited resources to guide players towards its microtransactions – but differs in that it is not selling a considerable advantage, instead giving players the option to play for longer rather than earn any considerable gain. This is an online world, after all, and if a player could decimate all you’ve built up simply by paying for the glory it would infuriate more players than it would reward.



"We've tried to make a good game first and foremost," says Simon Bradbury, one of the co-founders of Firefly Studios, "and then we kind of went 'Okay, how are we going to make some money from it?' and we did a lot more work with the strategy cards. That's what we've done with *Kingdoms* and that's what we're trying to do going forward. I think if you're doing anything else then you're kind of not making a game, you're making something else and trying to make a game out of a monetisation system – which is wrong."

This is all well and good, of course, but if this was entirely the case why is there still such negativity attached to free-to-play games? The truth is that those "bad apples", as one developer puts it, sully the business model for the rest, and players are automatically hesitant to try something that is advertised as free-to-play. "When people hear that the game is free, it's off-putting," says *Path Of Exile*'s Chris Wilson. "We try very much to market the game as 'this is what the game is' and later on when they're interested they happen to find out that it's free or expected to be free, but we try not to shove the word 'free' down their throat as much as we used to."

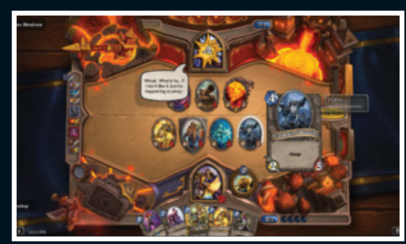
In fact, David Brevik agrees, but adds that if players hear that your game is free-to-play then you'll need to convince them it's not predatory about your cash, claiming that "in a sea of all these free-to-play games and these wildly different business models it's important to try and tout your message and to make it as clear as possible."

This means ensuring your players know – before they've even downloaded the game – that you're not going to force them to reach for their wallet at any point. That's a difficult message to get across when gamers – on the whole – refuse to acknowledge anything free-to-play. This is an especially important point for Jon Chey, one part of the team behind collectible card game *Card Hunter*.

"People don't know whether they're expected to pay or not," states Chey. "And what I mean by that is that they don't know whether the game has been balanced to work or not work depending on whether you paid. So for example we get people who run into some difficulty in the game, so they might lose a particular adventure, and they think 'Ugh, this is the point where the game is trying to squeeze money out of me'". Chey insists that *Card Hunter* hasn't been balanced with microtransactions in mind and that a certain level of skill is required to survive the tougher portions of the game. In fact, he adds that the opposite is also true and that those who do pay can often feel that the game *should* become easier as a result.

● Todd Harris, co-founder of HiRez Studios, has seen *Smite* become a PC hit and Xbox One MOBA pioneer.

As for the business model's supposed greed, did you know that on average only 10 per cent of players will actually pay for anything at all? Each of the developers we spoke to suggested that between 7-15% of their respective player bases actually end up handing over some cash. But what is it that makes this small group pay, and is there anything that these developers do to help things along? "I think the thing to do is to get people to play the game and to get them involved in the game," says Bradbury, "and to see it before you really need to spend anything. I think the way that we've done it in *Stronghold Kingdoms* is that you can go and play, and you get free stuff from tutorials and free cards and build queues are shorter so you can do quite a lot for the first few »

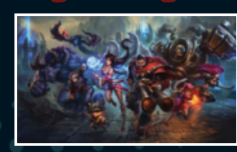


● *Hearthstone*'s simplicity, enabling newcomers to just begin playing, is under threat as more cards are added, but it's a hugely profitable game for Blizzard.

ONES TO BEAT

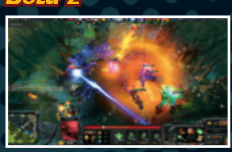
The most popular F2P games and their business models

League Of Legends



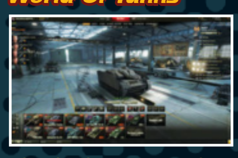
● As the most popular game – and that's including retail purchases – *League Of Legends* makes hundreds of millions each year selling new champions (which can be earned through play) or alternate skins (which can't).

Dota 2



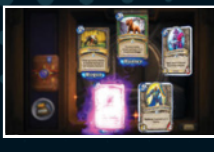
● Valve offers its playable characters for free but created a system of community-made customisation options that can be bought, as well as Compendiums that fund its International Tournament prize fund.

World Of Tanks



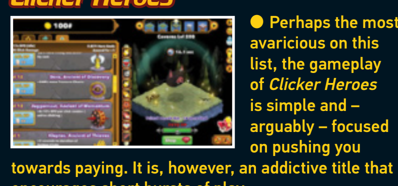
● The popularity of *World Of Tanks* still feels like something of a surprise to many, but its approach to free-to-play – whereby players can purchase 'premium' features – means it rakes in a rather large sum each month.

Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft



● It was recently revealed that *Hearthstone* makes roughly $20 million each month, and as a collectible card game it's easy to see why – it'd be much easier to complete those decks if you simply bought more card packs.

Clicker Heroes



● Perhaps the most avaricious on this list, the gameplay of *Clicker Heroes* is simple and – arguably – focused on pushing you towards paying. It is, however, an addictive title that encourages short bursts of play.

Path Of Exile



● A *Diablo*-style hack-'n'-slash RPG might not seem like the most well-suited to the F2P model, but it has proven that it can work. It's made a name for itself as one of the more ethical F2P titles by only selling cosmetic items.

Capcom's unique approach to balancing seems to be to make all of the characters overpowered – most fighters can fill the screen with death.


Pinball FX2 is perhaps one of the rare instances where locking content behind a paywall makes sense.


Much like *LOL*, *Marvel Heroes 2015* allows you to unlock different characters with unique skillsets.

days before you've even got to the point that you like it or it's got enough depth and gameplay that you might want to spend money on it."

Yet what is surprising is how each of these developers insist it's their community that makes the business model work; the way these developers talk of their communities, in fact, feels extremely personal. There's a sense that to earn money in free-to-play takes a little more compassion towards the gamer, and such kindness is met with reward. David Brevik talks of how much Gazillion gives away in *Marvel Heroes 2015* as freebies to its fans as "little thank-yous", claiming that players will be more willing to be generous if the developer is also generous.

Path Of Exile's Chris Wilson claims that the game's players know "it's a necessary thing", and that if they pay to play the game then Grinding Gears will continue to make content for the game. Jonathan Chey adds that if players – paying or otherwise – are left with a positive experience from the game, the monetisation systems and the community, then those players are more likely to spread the word, essentially advertising to other gamers who may end up playing themselves. Then there's Trion Worlds' CEO Scott Hartsman, who is passionate about his company's approach to those that are willing to pay. "We have actually named all of our optional subscription programs 'patrons' and that's just part of our philosophy; it's a term out of fine art and we would rather think of our generous supporters as patrons."

With big name titles like *Rift* and more recently *Trove* under its belt, Trion Worlds has proven it knows a thing or two about the right way to monetise free-to-play. "We know we could make more money if we

GOOD VS EVIL

What are the best and worst ways to monetise a free-to-play game?

GOOD

Alternate Skins

Different skins are often only available through real money purchases, which makes them that little bit more special – a sign that the person playing is particularly fond of the character, too.

Customisable hats

Or any type of swappable cosmetic gear, really. This is Valve's preferred means of monetisation, and it has certainly proven popular since players can even sell their own creations.

Unlockable characters

Most MOBAs rely on this as a means of income, but so long as you're given opportunities to try before you buy *and* unlock them via in-game currency too then it's not so bad.

Item rentals

As long as the cost of actually renting the item is good value – which is a difficult element to balance – then the concept of item rental shouldn't be hated too much.



"We know we could make more money if we did meaner things but we don't want to be that company"
Scott Hartsman, Trion Worlds

did meaner things," he says, "but we don't want to do that. We don't want to be that company, we want to be in this for the long-term. We're a publisher and a platform for many games and people *will* finish a game, and in PC – unlike mobile – players are far more aware of who the publisher's names are and who they want to do business with again, and we want them to want to come back."

It's something of a revelation, then, that the very best free-to-play games – and that can perhaps only be measured by their popularity – don't ever force their players into purchasing. It seems to be something of an accepted truth among the truly popular free-to-play titles that respecting your players, making a great game and avoiding pay-to-win monetisation is the *only* way to succeed in an admittedly difficult business to forecast.

And that's then where the real issue comes in; for all the determination to do right by the players, these developers are still unable to shift that muddied perception that surrounds free-to-play games. But at the same time it seems to be the cost that these developers are willing to pay.

"From our point-of-view, free players provide most of the content for the game," says Simon Bradbury of the player-driven politics of *Stronghold Kingdoms*. "They're in there playing, and often free players acting together will do a lot better than the big paying players. They can actually be a political block that are working well together and providing a real challenge – much better than a challenge we could've provided with the AI in a single-player game." There's no frustration among these developers, knowing that only 10 per cent of players will pay, because they know that those that are playing – for free or not – will spread the word that free-to-play *can* be done right.

"I think that some people definitely are open to free-to-play," says David Brevik, "the problem is that there are plenty of games out there where their philosophy is skewed, and it's very much products that don't care about selling power or don't care about charging ridiculous amounts of money." But he – as with all the developers we spoke to – is positive about the business model's future. These developers might have an uphill struggle to prove their point, but they believe players will – eventually – understand the true value of free-to-play.

"You're going to run through all sorts of weird scenarios and unusual games and all sorts of gimmicks," says Brevik, "before you actually come to a stable state where free-to-play is more consistently what – as a gamer – I would like to see." There's a sense that, even now, the free-to-play model still doesn't quite know its own value as developers battle embittered gamers, the often false expectations of a free-to-play title and even the greedy publishers on the wrong side of monetisation. It's a price they're forced to pay, and as the industry gradually changes to accept the model it's becoming clear that it isn't inherently manipulative.

As Chris Wilson puts it, "Previously the incentive was 'Make a good box, do some marketing, make it sound really appealing' and once the consumer has paid for it based on hype they're stuck with whatever they get." Free-to-play, he believes, is actually the best model for gamers, whether they know it or not. "With free-to-play, the consumer won't give you any money unless there's something good there," he adds. "It encourages people to actually make good quality games." It's hard to deny logic like that, so maybe it's time we tried to alter our own cynical perspectives – it won't cost much, after all.

EVIL

Mystery packs
Unsurprisingly these random loot drops can feel a little frustrating at times, but it's been a staple of collectible card games for so long it hardly feels like a negative anymore.

New content
It's not truly free-to-play if, at some point, you'll need to pay to see all of the content available. This can be handled well – as a sort of DLC – but it's rarely done right.

Account boosts
Whether it's additional loot drops, faster experience gains or whatever other account-wide benefits you can buy, this often feels like a contrived – and imbalanced – means of paying.

Time-savers
It's a pain to lock progress behind increasingly longer wait times or time-restricted energy bars; a cheap and easy method for developers to force overeager players into paying.

Weapons, armour and vehicles
If the only way to improve your strength and power is by purchasing certain items or equipment then the gameplay itself has been corrupted.



Plastic Fantastic

Harmonix may develop the Rock Band games, but it's Mad Catz, the unsung heroes

Rock Band has been supported by hardware dev Mad Catz since 2008, but the manufacturer has always stayed behind the curtain… We go backstage with Richard Neville, Mad Catz' senior product development manager, to talk about what it's like to be the roadie for gaming's biggest rhythm action franchise

When Mad Catz contacted Harmonix to talk about how the publishing and distribution of *Rock Band 4* was going to be handled, the hardware developer came upon some distressing news: all the moulds it had used to create the instruments in previous games had been scrapped, literally.

"It'd been five years since *Rock Band 3* when we started working on the new hardware, so that meant a few things – it meant we had to get and find all the tools: the plastics, the injection moulds, the tooling," explains Richard Neville – who's been at Mad Catz for 16 years working on gaming peripherals and hardware. "You can do everything you can to protect these 'tools', but they're made of steel – by the time we were ready for *Rock Band 4*, they'd been sat there so long they rusted. We actually melted them down and sold them for scrap! Within months of scrapping it, of course, Harmonix was in touch and everything started going ahead [laughs]."

It was surprising to see Neville laugh after making this statement because as he and Mad Catz's global PR director, Alex Verrey, were keen to tell us… those things cost a *lot* of money. "This is the side of product development stuff that no-one really thinks about," Neville explains. "Each of these jelly moulds – these 'tools' – cost hundreds of thousands of pounds. They're very precise, very sturdy, very heavy… and we didn't have any of them left."

But it was a blessing in disguise; it meant that Mad Catz could build from the ground up, start again and take the instruments apart in a modular fashion – observe the core components of *Rock Band*'s now-famous kit, from drums to guitars to mics. "Even though all the new instruments *look* identical to the old ones, they're actually totally new – built from the ground up," Neville explains. Mad Catz invested in new moulds to create the instruments' casing, and re-evaluated what the interior chipset needed to do, too. The result – as we found out as Mad Catz took us through each new instrument, beat by beat – is incredible.

on the stage, who really make the game sing

The drums in *Rock Band 3*, for example, were purely digital. Depending on how hard you hit the crash, or how lightly you chose to ride the snare, you were only ever going to get one of six sound variations – it's not fully noticeable, but it certainly makes the game a much more rigid affair than live music. That's not what *Rock Band 4* is about – it really wants to run away with that idea of a rockstar fantasy, and to do that, it's made the drums perform exactly like a real-life electronic drumkit. That is to say… it reacts to *you*.

"Right now, this doesn't really need to exist," laughs Neville, showing off the dynamic responses on a program hooked up to the drumkit – the harder the hit, the bigger the flash of colour the software pumps out. There's no digital scaling here. "The game is still purely beat matching, you hit the pad when the gem falls on the screen and you get the points," he continues. "Harmonix wants to make *Rock Band 4* a platform – it's not going to release a *Rock Band 5* – so we imagine it's going to want to do expansions in the coming years, and these expansions might have something to do with this more analogue input. So, of course, we have to figure that out *now* [laughs]. We need to think ahead, even if it's only something that *might* need supplying."



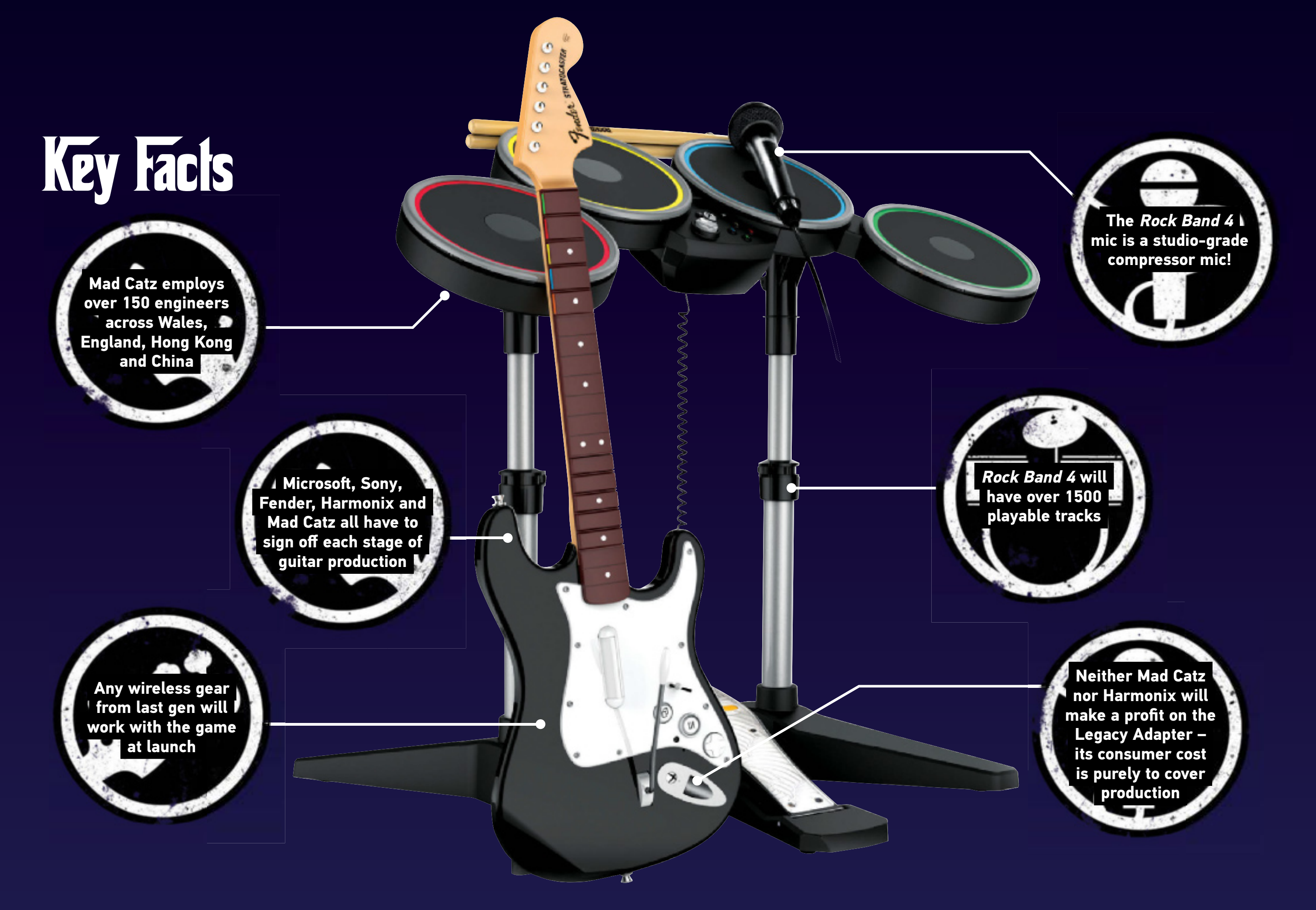
Richard Neville, senior product development manager

It's an interesting side of peripheral development that's only really become a problem recently: back on the old generations of consoles, a single game would never need to have longevity instilled into its peripherals: there could just be another one shipped when the inevitable sequel comes out. But with *Rock Band* existing on a digital platform that's only ever going to grow as time goes by, Mad Catz needed to plan ahead for every eventuality…

"All of the products in the *Rock Band 4* range are firmware upgradeable, too" explains Neville. "We don't shout about that, but that basically means that if anything comes up later on in the game's life that we aren't ready for, we can remotely deploy a patch and flash the instrument's firmware, and add what we need to add. Because we're not allowed to update the instruments directly through the console – the first parties won't allow that – we've come up with a way for you to update the instruments via Bluetooth on PS4, or through USB on Xbox One."

But if Mad Catz wants you to shell out for its instruments – and expects them to last for the lifetime of the *Rock Band 4* platform – then there's going to need to be some improvements on the last generation of rhythm action peripherals… the guitars for *Rock Band 3* had some issues (most notably in the way the tilt function worked) and a lot of the drum kits would end up dimpling where persistent drummers hit upon the exact same spot for every beat.

"We've been looking at every component part of the kit when we've been building [the instruments] up again – even down to looking at the varying densities of foam we use between the drum pad and the sensor inside," explains Neville. "It's a long process – you think you've got the perfect model, you get the plastic injected, then you realise that something, somewhere, isn't quite »



> "I actually have tennis elbow because of the amount of testing we had to do" Richard Neville

right… so you try again. It takes months and months and months to get it right!"

But Mad Catz seems to have gotten it right this time – we went pretty hard on the drum kits, and noticed there was no cross-talk this time. No matter how hard you laid into the kit, you'd notice that the game would never interpret your input as something from another pad (a heavy hit on green would never scan as a yellow, for example). This is something that became a pretty big problem for drummers in *Rock Band 3*, and Neville assures us that configuring the algorithm that solved this issue wasn't easy… "I actually have tennis elbow – I kid you not – because of the testing we had to do with examining *all* the varieties of velocity and combinations of drum hits you could make!"

And it's not just the drums that have been improved, either: we got to play around with the guitars, and despite being cosmetically exactly the same, there are some key differences that really stood out to us. They feel less 'toy-like' – which has always been something *Rock Band* peripherals have attracted criticism for – and whilst they still handle like miniature guitars, there's a more satisfying ergonomic quality to them.

"The guitar has gone through several changes since the *Rock Band 3* iteration… firstly, the guitar itself is *much* more solid when you're holding it in your hands – you can't twist it from the neck as much as you could with the old products: we've added structural reinforcements on the inside of the neck, and some extra ribbing to help out with that," Neville explains.

"You could also compress the old guitars – forcing down on the body, you could feel the plastic buckle. You can't do that in the new ones, and that's intentional – we want the products to feel less like toys, and more like a real musical instrument. We want to make you believe you're a rock god again."

But for anyone playing a videogame, the 'feel' of the instrument isn't really the focus – instead, there's more attention on how the game responds to *you*, to *your* actions, to *your* inputs. To this end, the frets of the *Rock Band* guitars have been re-thought, made slightly more 'springy': an intentional move to let you know you *are* definitely hitting the right fret. There are also more discernible ridges in the guitar's neck, so you can rely on your finger's reading of the fret notches and not have to drag your eyes away from that precious note lane in the middle of the screen.

"We call that 'force actuation technology'," explains Neville. "You need to *know* when you've hit a fret on the board. When your eye is on the screen, you need to know the satisfying click when you've hit the fret – we've made sure that's even more obvious to you in *Rock Band 4*." The guitars also make use of a digital accelerometer to make that tilt function a little more… reliable (for reference, digital accelerometers are what the DualShock 3s have been using since launch day on the PS3).

"I can guarantee you if anyone goes digging out their old guitars and wants to use the tilt feature, I promise it doesn't work," admits Neville. "It was a mechanical solution that used a ball-bearing or other physical switch, and after even a few months players would start to struggle with it. The mechanical switch can either get stuck or just degrade and it won't respond anymore. What we've done for *Rock Band 4* is we've gone with a digital accelerometer. We'd have done this before, but it wasn't cheap enough from a consumer standpoint, but since the technology's moved on in leaps and bounds, it's cheaper to use now."

So if you've ever been put off from playing a *Rock Band* game because the instruments just felt too 'gamey' for you, then fear not: *Rock Band* is all about living up to that rockstar fantasy the *Guitar Hero* games established over a decade ago. Thanks to the new tech in the current generation of consoles, and the way Mad Catz has been developing its production pipeline, *Rock Band 4* is ready to really take advantage of the current gap in mainstream rhythm action games. You'll be paying a lot for the initial bundle, granted, but Harmonix and Mad Catz both want you to believe that it's a worthy investment – one that'll outlive the lifespan of the PS4 and the Xbox One. To do that, they've made the hardware even easier to maintain, and even cheaper to run.

"We've managed to *dramatically* increase the battery life of these instruments from previous gens – we're 35-40 hours on Xbox and way more than that on PlayStation. Oh, and we've reduced the number of batteries they take to run, too… it used to be three batteries, which is *such* a pain: who buys a packet of three batteries, right? [laughs] Oh yeah, and we've lowered the latency, too."

We were surprised by how satisfying it was to handle the new instruments. On a superficial level, they're the same, but this is Rock Band's evolution beyond the gimmick: this is the game away from the brackets of EA, away from the ownership of MTV, and is composed from the notebooks of Harmonix and Mad Catz working in harmony. "Absolutely everything in this kit is new – even if it doesn't look it," Neville concludes as he picks up the guitar, ready to show us what he's got.



The game may look similar to the previous entries, but the instruments feel *different*.

There are new 'guitar solo' parts to the songs in *Rock Band 4* that really show off what the new guitars can do – they make good use of the bottom half of the fret board, and let you rock out to your heart's content.

THE INNOV

Despite the power of consoles and their ever-increasing reach, why does the humble PC remain the frontline for innovation in gaming?

You might have already heard the news: PC gaming is dead. Consoles, Facebook, tablets and phones – that's supposedly where interactive entertainment's future exclusively resides. Apparently, we're told, consumers value ease of consumption over all else and the PC simply doesn't stack up. After all, it's more difficult to find enough space, set up your system, find your gaming mouse, download, install and start playing your game than it is to visit the App Store and, within seconds, start playing the latest *Candy Clone*.

And yet, the PC is performing rather healthily as a hotbed for gaming. In particular, it's at the leading edge of much of what we see as innovative and ground-breaking in today's game design and technology space. To be as blunt and reductive as possible: the exciting stuff is happening on PC. If it's currently happening on consoles, too, then it probably was once, at some point, happening on PC.

Let's take a brief moment to list a few of the ways that, in recent history, the PC has evolved the gaming space in ways that other systems have since adopted as norms. Digital distribution, free-to-play, social gaming, MMOs, usable level design tools, digital game refunds, full support for user-created game modifications, early access/in-development releases. These represent just a handful of what has been spawned from the PC game development and distribution community, the majority of them now visible in some form across home consoles, handhelds and mobile devices.

Why does the PC continue to represent the most fertile ground for brainstorming, developing and launching these concepts, some of which have resulted in genuinely disrupting, to an enormous degree, the way that the videogame business operates and views itself? Digital distribution, for instance, has had an earth shattering effect on not only game sales, but on who can now realistically go about releasing »

ATION
STATION



a game and getting it before the eyes of the right audience. With retailers taken out of the equation, the environment is ripe for an explosion of ideas from hitherto invisible talent.

It would be difficult to even envisage gaming in 2015 without digital distribution and the huge diversity of games that it has brought with it. Without the PC that diversity wouldn't have been triggered, at least not as quickly or to the same scale.



● Independent studios continue to test ideas through the PC audience, attracted by the numerous ways to distribute.

● The opportunity to release games in development is invaluable for honest feedback, says *Rust* creator Garry Newman.

We only have to look briefly into the past to see evidence of the PC's continued success and overwhelming staying power. Where the likes of Atari, Sega, Jaguar, Commodore and more have failed to cultivate an audience and development scene over the long term, the PC has triumphed enormously thanks to a barrier of entry that is all but non-existent. The only real gatekeeper to PC development, once you own a PC, is the quality of your own development skills.

"PC gaming is the sole survivor of that Nineties gaming frontier," explains Jamie Barber, development manager at nDreams, a Farnborough-based studio currently working on virtual reality game *The Assembly*. "The PC itself is a blank slate for developers – all manner of weird and wonderful development platforms and operating systems, both open and closed, are readily available for creative people to experiment and play with. That, in and of itself, is based on a long history of connectivity via modems and bulletin boards – communication and community has been there forever with a few of us remembering fondly the days of the BBS and Usenet!"

The opinion that the open nature of the PC platform, absent from the webs of approval bureaucracy that entangle even the simplest of modern console releases, leads to greater innovation is a sentiment that rings true for more than just Barber. CCP, too, maker of *EVE Online* and the upcoming *EVE Valkyrie*, cite openness as a major contributing factor to gaming advancements.

"I think the open nature of the PC platform lends itself well to innovation," says Sean Deck, CCP's SVP of product development. "That's why you see people try new business models like F2P on PCs first, and from there take those lessons to other platforms.

"Obviously you have more games coming out on PC, where there are no gatekeepers, than on consoles. Good and bad titles, original and innovate stuff as well as imitations and more of the same. That's one of the characteristics that makes the PC such a fascinating and competitive market. PC is a huge market, with the internet providing almost endless ways to reach the end users. It's a fertile ground for indie developers and new developers entering the market."

"PC gaming is a fertile ground for indie developers and new developers entering the market"



That market rarely shrinks. Given that PCs have been around for such a long time compared to modern consoles, their reach across demographics is enormous. You could feasibly come across a typical person of a certain age in the street and fail to be surprised if they tell you they've never played or owned a videogame console. It would be surprising if they told you they'd never owned or used a PC.

Such a large and diverse potential audience for your games provides not only the possibility of success, it also opens up many avenues for experimentation and testing of brand new ideas. Consoles, says Barber of nDreams, cannot hope to command such a valuable focus group:

"Reaching across all demographics, the PC makes experimenting with different audiences and payment models very straightforward. The PC does get the latest technologies first, but it also has by far the widest hardware gap with such a plethora of end-user configurations around. Inevitably, a lot of these technologies are unstable – some of them don't make it whilst others do; whereas console are generally stable platforms with a focus on specific demographics and typical ultra-high standards for releases."



● The advent of the Steam Machines, bringing PC gaming to the living room in a more convenient and immediate way, could be groundbreaking.

Those 'ultra-high standards' for releases is what puts off many smaller, independent developers from building games specifically for consoles. By nature, many of these development projects utilise ideas and forms of play that are either completely fresh and new, or so rare that there are few games to compare them against. As a result, it becomes difficult for a platform holder to bestow their mark of approval upon such games – the form of the game so unusual that it runs the risk of not meeting the pre-defined criteria for a 'high quality' release. How, after all, does one traditionally judge the quality of something that is incomparable to anything else?

Console players, then, buy into a system with the knowledge (expectation, perhaps) that someone is working to make sure any and all available games meet a set of quality assurance guidelines. This, over time, creates a demographic of console players that become intolerant of anything that doesn't meet these high standards. Experimental game development, with all of its trials, bugs and pitfalls, doesn't tend to fit in with such company. Yet, it's the experimental space rather than the

rigid space of platform holder approvals, that leads to gaming evolution. In fact, much of the PC audience has gone the other way and have begun to adore those developers that are happy to open up development, via programs such as Steam's Early Access and show their work as they go along – bugs and all. PC not only promotes the release of all kinds of weird and wacky ideas, it allows players to see how those ideas are generated, crafted and altered over the course of development. In turn, the feedback provided by the public to creators allows for tweaking and fine tuning of concepts before full release day.

"The weird thing about consoles, I guess, is that every generation they lock a bunch of people out," explains Garry Newman, owner of Facepunch Studios and creator of both *Garry's Mod* and *Rust*, when asked about the demographic of PC players and the size of the potential testing ground for new game ideas. "When people get a new PC they'll give their old one away and add a new player [of PC games]. A new console usually means throwing away the last generation because no one wants it. So, there's always going to be millions more PC players than console players."

Newman came out of the modder community and, as such, is very much used to the idea that hordes of players around the world will happily, and sometimes forcefully, make their feelings regarding what you've made very clear. With that experience, releasing *Rust* through Early Access was the best thing possible for the game. »

● The open development space of the PC allows for the creations such as *Garry's Mod*, a sandbox physics game.



SOCIAL TENSIONS

The PC as champion of digital communications

● One of the game design areas that the PC is credited for launching and growing is that of social interaction and ease of communication with fellow players. There are a number of technological reasons for this, not least the easy availability of communication software and that it's easier to type on a keyboard than it is with a control pad.

Further, PCs have by default been open to internet-led communication for a far longer period of time than consoles. As such, PC users have developed the expectation that PC-to-PC communication be available at all times. "Pretty much everything about the PC is social interaction," suggests Newman of Facepunch Studios. "People are very much used to the idea that a PC connects them with millions of other people all over the world. So it makes a lot of sense that players would use that platform to put themselves in a bunch of different scenarios with other people. The PC did this a long time before consoles ever did."

Indeed, this expectation means the PC remains the undisputed champion for all things relating to innovation in multiplayer gaming. Consoles, despite how easy it is now to connect to the internet and play with/against others, have failed to create the same kind of relationship with social interaction. The PC is synonymous with communication; the console is not.

● *EVE Online*, along with its genre peers, has used the PC to define what we understand today as an MMO.

“People use Early Access for different reasons,” continues Newman when queried about how such a means of distribution can result in further PC gaming innovation. “Some use it as a promotional device, some use it as a funding device. We come from the world of modders so we believe you release as early as you can. The alternative to using Early Access for us was to release to a closed group of testers and develop in secret for two years. That would have sucked. It’s important to get that feedback and to update constantly. We released the same way for *Garry’s Mod* before Early Access existed.”

Without Early Access, concedes Newman, *Rust* would probably not have been released. The issue, he explains, is that his studio simply didn’t know whether what they’d already built would be something people would want to play. In such a situation, without the benefit of easy comparisons to other games, it’s unlikely that a platform holder would take a risk by green lighting such a risky project.

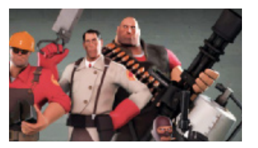
On PC, however, there’s comparatively little risk involved if you decide to release by yourself through Early Access. As such, more ideas are put in front of the public and concepts that hadn’t previously existed are given a chance to take on a life on their own. “We were 50/50 on whether we had [with *Rust*] something worth continuing with,” Newman continues. “We couldn’t justify spending any more time on it and not knowing. We decided that if we released on Early Access it will either be accepted and take off, or we’ll iterate until it takes off – but in the meantime it would at least be funding its own development.

“On the PC, if I have an idea in the morning I can sit down and code it. By 5pm there could be 20,000 people all over the world playing what I made. You don’t need to ask for permission, you don’t need to buy hardware or apply for a licence, you don’t have to go through a certification process. That’s the big difference [between console and PC] as far as I’m concerned.” Newman, in fact, goes further than to merely suggest that

“If I have an idea in the morning, I can code it. By 5pm there could be 20,000 people playing it”



● Allowing manufacturers to make their own Steam Machines means their form factor is likely to vary, much like PC bodies.



● F2P has not only been legitimised by PC gaming, it has also breathed vibrant new life into existing games.

licensing and certification hurdles are the reason for the comparative lack of innovation on consoles. He believes that the platform holders don’t want change, given that changes in market activity can result in unpredictable future behaviour from consumers. Unpredictability, for a company with shareholders to please, is not a positive state of affairs.

“I think one of the big problems for consoles,” says Newman, “is that they see games like *DayZ* come out and blow up. They know they can’t get the game on their platform with their current certification bullshit, so they have to work around that. They aren’t evolving willingly, they’re being forced into it.

“To be honest, I think if they had any balls and foresight they would have never shipped with a disc drive. They’d just have a big-ass, open-to-anyone app store and said ‘Fuck you’ to everyone without internet. Because that’s the future.”

The openness of the PC platform, resulting in it being the perfect base from which to test new ideas and innovate on design, has also paid dividends for *The Forest* developer, Endnight Games. Like *Rust*, *The Forest* was launched through Steam’s Early Access program and, as such, has been playable since well before the completion of development.

“First of all, [without Early Access] *The Forest* probably wouldn’t exist at all,” admits Endnight Games’ co-founder Anna Terekhova. “I knew starting this that it was a big concept. A world where you can chop down all the trees and build whatever you want, craft tools and weapons, hunt, fish, fight an intelligent enemy and uncover a story that would be told in a new way – i.e. without cutscenes or dialogue…

“I do think the freedom to just make whatever you want and try to find an audience for it on PC does allow someone like us to make something like *The Forest*. At the same time, though, a few days after the original rough trailer was posted onto Steam Greenlight, Sony called. A couple of months later, Microsoft was in contact. I think all platforms are interested in new ideas and quality games.”

All platforms are interested in quality games, but all other platforms are looking to PC first to try and uncover those quality games. Microsoft and Sony might be/have been interested in bringing *The Forest* to their platforms, but there's little chance the game would have ever even got to the trailer phase without the wide open doorway offered by the PC.

"Starting out we had no real way of making a console game; no dev kit and no licence," Terekhova continues. "Making a game for PC made sense. If it was possible to just load builds onto a retail PS4 or Xbox One then it's possible we would have started down that route."

At present, that console route simply isn't viable for a developer hoping to turn an idea into reality, especially if that idea is somewhat unusual. The cost, licensing and certification process turns the business aspects of releasing a game on console into a full time job, adding to the already time-consuming process of building a game. As many of the teams working on innovative projects tend to be small – Endnight Games consists of just three full-time employees – there is little spare time or resources to dedicate to these red tape processes.

Deck of CCP believes that the future of the PC is bright and that it will continue to act as an important platform no matter the nature of other devices: "I think that anyone who is involved with this industry, as well as any serious gamers out there, knows that the PC is a healthy and vibrant platform. It is not going away anytime soon. Sure, we've seen new platforms emerging, not only in the past few years but during the last few decades. The growing gaming industry has been thriving on platforms other than PC, and the latest console and mobile platforms have reinforced that trend, but it has not proved to be negative for the PC as a platform."

Newman echoes the idea that the PC will continue to thrive given the sheer scale of the install base and the diverse nature of the games developed for it. However, he isn't wedded to the PC to the point that he wouldn't consider developing for another platform. If something better comes along, far enough. Only it's difficult for him to entertain thoughts as to what sort of platform that might be…

"As long as there are people with PCs there will be people willing to sell games to them. If no one is playing PC games anymore then I don't think anyone will be sad. That'd be like being sad that no one is making games for the Amiga anymore. If we stop making games for PC then we'll have all moved onto something much, much better – I can't even start to imagine what that would be, though."





● The success of Early Access has resulted in all manner of outlandish and niche ideas flourishing, their success highlighting the incredible diversity of tastes that make up the PC gaming audience.

STEAMING AHEAD

How important has Valve been for PC gaming?

● A huge proportion of PC games are now sold through Steam, Valve's digital distribution platform. It's not only the players that are smitten with the all-conquering entity, though, developers are equally positive about the platform.

"Steam has been such a game changer for us," explains Endnight's Terekhova. "I think without Steam finding the audience for a game like *The Forest* would have been really difficult. Valve has been really good to us, I can't think of a company I'd prefer to be in charge of PC gaming."

Sean Deck of CCP shares the positivity: "Steam has had a tremendous effect on distribution and sales for games, and as long as gamers appreciate the service it will continue to play a big part in how we buy and enjoy our games."

Barber of nDreams takes the idea further, however, suggesting that Steam has played an enormous role in creating the positivity that currently surrounds the PC as a gaming platform. "Steam is an incredible success and rightly so. I can organise, keep up to date and synchronise my games across systems easily – to me that's a great thing! I think it would be hard, in hindsight, to not see Steam as helping to unify and have people view the PC as a viable gaming platform, for everybody. This makes the other systems easy to accept and use alongside Steam."



THE FEEL GOOD

GAMES™ CHATS TO ROCKET LEAGUE'S JEREMY DUNHAM ABOUT THE



HIT OF THE SUMMER

SURPRISE HIT THAT TOOK OVER EVERYONE'S LIFE ON PSN AND PC

Rocket League had over 100,000 concurrent players at its peak, and it managed to smash through the five million downloads mark on PSN – one of the first games to do so this generation. We spoke to Psyonix Studio's vice president, Jeremy Dunham, about how you balance a game for pro players and casuals alike, the importance of PS+, and how it feels to be gaming's very own feel good hit of the summer…

***Rocket League* has been immensely popular, but a lot of people aren't aware Psyonix Studios already released a similar game beforehand – *Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket Powered Battle Cars*. What is it about *Rocket League* that's made it so much more popular?**

I don't think it's any *one* thing – it's a combination of things that really went our way. First of all, it's just a better game than *Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket Powered Battle Cars*: even though the gameplay is essentially the same, and the concept is essentially the same, we tried to do what we could to make the original game *better*. Better in every possible way. So we spent *years* listening to the community, listening to what they liked about it, what it was that made them come back and play time and time again.

But we also listened to what they *didn't* like – our whole approach to the development of *Rocket League* was to take this five years of research we'd been collecting and apply it to the game, always keen to *not* lose what made the game fun, but also to just continually make it better.

Do you think delivering the game through PS+ was an integral part of the game's success?

PlayStation+ was a big deal because all we've wanted to do – with this game and *Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket Powered Battle Cars* – is get people to sit down and play it. You know, the game speaks for itself, but the problem we had with the first game was that it didn't have a lot of PR behind it, and it came out when PSN was still getting its footing… I was in the press at IGN when the game came out, and I remember what the climate was like for games that only came out on that platform: it was an uphill battle. [Digital-only] games back then had this perception of being inaccessible to a lot of people, and they were competing against games that had built-in audiences, and it was really hard to get attention.

Now, though, we're in a much different climate – [console gamers] are willing to try different games, and PlayStation+ allowed us to get to that point where we can put our game in front of five million people. PS+ is a *huge* deal – it allowed us to say 'Hey, here's our game, judge it or don't judge it, but here it is'. That »



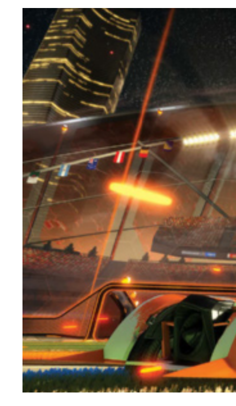
"THE THING ABOUT ROCKET LEAGUE IS IF YOU

» was the turning point – that was when people could see it wasn't as weird or low-quality as some folks might have expected. On top of that, gaming culture is so different now – back when the first game came out in 2008, YouTube was still a fledgling organisation, streaming wasn't part of the culture and it was very difficult for people to get access to games content outside of their own house.

Players had to rely on sites or videos just to see what's going on – now, though, no matter what country you're in, you can share and stream whatever you like and we think that definitely helped get the word out as well.

But it's just a fun game – you can sit down and play it in five-to-seven minutes. The only thing you have to remember about it is what you learned, skill-wise – it's totally skill-based, and we don't over-complicate things. A lot of games these days like to throw feature after feature after feature at you just because they want you to have this *huge* experience. The problem with that is that there's just so much to learn and remember and compete with and *do*, that sometimes these features become more of a detriment than a positive quality. We think that in our case, simplicity works in our favour.

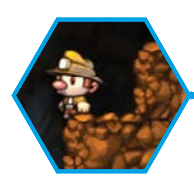

Jeremy Dunham is vice president of Psyonix Studios, formerly senior designer of Zipper studios and a veteran journalist at IGN.





MORE MULTIPLAYER MAYHEM

Rocket League might be the foremost indie hit of this year, but there are many other couch co-op games out there that'll get the most out of your wireless pads if you're looking for them…



SPELUNKY

Perfect for up to four players, *Spelunky* is actually a really intense multiplayer experience… not as accessible as *Rocket League*, but if you get addicted to score chasing, this roguelike really comes into its own



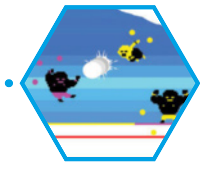
GANG BEASTS

Amazingly good fun based around controlling doughy little men and getting them to smash each other in the face, push each other into furnaces or just pummel each other to death… it's relaxing!



TOWERFALL: ASCENSION

Deceptively simple in its execution, *Towerfall: Ascension* relies on skill and reflexes to come out of top of your friends… be careful though – a snipe shot from across the 2D map can ruin friendships



SPORTSFRIENDS

Composed of minigames, you can have a lot of fun with *Sportsfriends*, despite its small offering of content. Like *Rocket League*, it's skill-based, meaning there's a permanent desire to just *get better*



The mechanical minimalism of *Rocket League* is interesting – you've built it all from a core physics system.
The thing about *Rocket League* is that if you succeed or if you fail, it's down to you and it's down to how you played.

You've played a lot of games, I've played a lot of games and I'm sure everyone has seen this 'built-in' moments or events that can determine whether or not you succeed: do you have the right weapon, do you have the right armour, are you the right level, do you have the right skills – any number of things can inhibit how you play.

***Rocket League* has such a broad appeal, too – from the core eSports audience to the most casual of players; how do you balance the game for those two communities?**
That's one of the coolest things about the game – even if you're not that good at it, you can still have fun with it. We think that's the sign of a really good game: you can be the worst person in room on *Rocket League* and you can still have a really good time. To us, that means we've done our job. You know, it seems like a fairly simple execution [when the game's on screen], but that's because we argued and let's say 'politely conversed' for years and years and years on this game… we we keep the people that just want to have fun happy?' whilst also asking '…and how do we keep the people that want to *win* happy?' It's harder than you think to hit that delicate balance – but we're continuing to do it, to put ourselves in other people's shoes and continue to react based on what we would do if we were them.

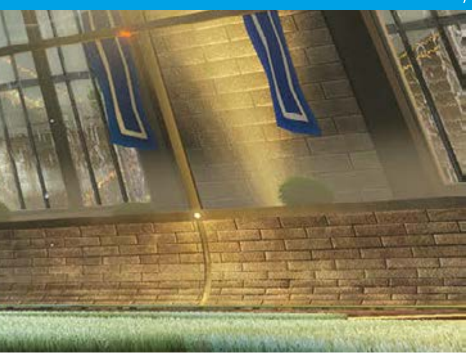
How does it feel to have so many gamers following what you do so closely, and so suddenly?
There was a certain goal we had in mind for our ten-week sales, and another figure we wanted to hit for lifetime sales of *Rocket League* – these targets were based on recouping costs related to the development of the game, and what we thought the game deserved. That's all we wanted to do: we were happy enough with what we made that we only wanted to break even – if we could do that, we'd consider ourselves a success.

By the end of the first week, we'd already surpassed *all* of the goals we'd set for ourselves. Well, we actually surpassed that number after two and a half days… which we did not expect at all! But that created new problems and we were like 'Oh *shit*, what do we do now? [laughs] Look at how huge this game is, everything we do now is going to be under a microscope'. And that's what we've seen – we've had to really *really* carefully consider every decision… it's terrifying, and it's a lot of people to make angry if you don't get it right!

You know, we don't want like seven million people coming after us with a vengeance if we get anything wrong!



SUCCEED OR IF YOU FAIL, IT'S DOWN TO YOU AND IT'S DOWN TO HOW YOU PLAYED”



But *Rocket League* doesn't need any of that, it's all physics-based and the idea is simply that you have to hit the ball into the opposite goal. The only thing you can rely on is your own knowledge and your own ability – that's the beauty of a physics-based game.

Going to PS+ has propelled *Rocket League* to some of the highest digital download numbers we've seen this gen – one million Steam sales and five million PSN downloads!
And we're really glad to see that – we were willing to sacrifice all the upfront sales we would have gotten in favour of all the publicity and marketing you get for being a free game on PS+. Sony advertises *the hell* out of its PS+ games on the website, on the storefront and through its social channels… without the PS+ marketing machine we'd be so far behind where we are now in terms of numbers.

had so many takes on it, trying to get it right. We develop the eSports side of things separately from the casual side of things, too…

I don't know if you've ever played a pick-up game of soccer with your friends, but *Rocket League* works out quite similarly to that. You'll have the guys that are just there to have fun, or they're there for the exercise, or they're just there to unwind after work, but then you'll have the guys that don't care if they're playing with their best friend, or their brother, or someone they haven't seen in 15 years – they just want to *win*.

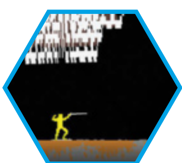
The mentality of these players that get together can be so incredibly different, but the unifier is that they're playing football together, but where they're different is *why* they're playing football and what they expect to get out of it. So we have to take that same approach when we're making a videogame – we need to ask ourselves 'How can



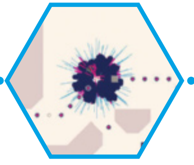
#IDARB
This interesting little Xbox One exclusive allows you to watch other people playing and modify the gameplay experience by tweeting hashtags at them… ideal for parties of more than four people



CASTLE CRASHERS
For a more co-operative experience than a competitive one, *Castle Crashers* allows you and four friends to team up and wail on a medieval settlement, combining skills and tactics to come out on top



NIDHOGG
Gaming's foremost 2D fencing simulator, *Nidhogg* takes the classic swordplay sport and rejigs it for a fantastic one-on-one multiplayer experience. You feel a bit like the Count of Monte Cristo – that's its best point



N++
A ninja-styled physics-based platformer, *N++* has over 1000 levels. That's a lot of content to work through with friends (up to four!) and there's little else as satisfying as completing a level you've been stuck on for *hours*



TABLE TOP RACING
Remember *Micro Machines*, the retro game that changed the lives of a generation? Well, that's kind-of been rebooted in the form of *Table Top Racing* – *Micro Machines*' spiritual successor

THE 20 DOS AND DON'TS OF GAME DEVELOPMENT

We've seen a fair few games in our time, so we know what we're talking about. This is the gospel according to games™

01



DON'T USE AUDIO LOGS AS A STORY REPLACEMENT

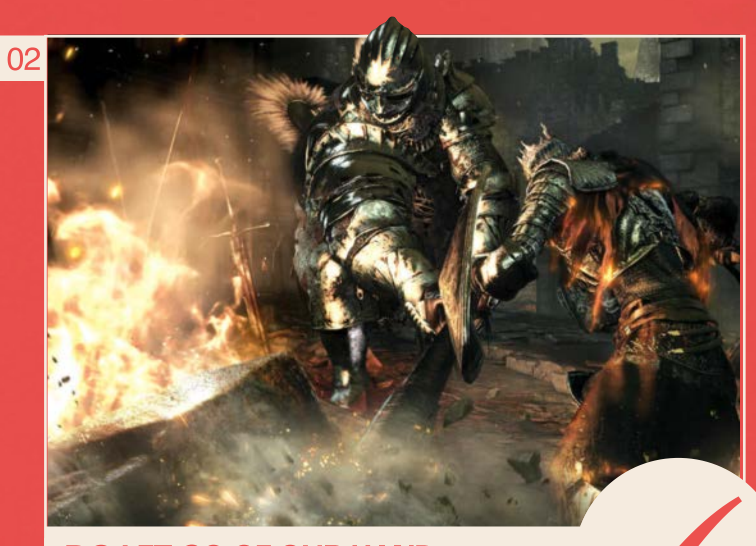
X

NOTABLE EXAMPLES

- Watch Dogs
- The Order:1886
- BioShock series

INITIALLY POPULARISED – and seen as a neat touch – in the *System Shock* games, the audio log came into the mainstream consciousness through *BioShock*. Since then, seemingly every game with a story to tell has done so, at least in some part, via the medium of audio recordings. It's a quick and easy way of lumping in more exposition where it otherwise wouldn't be, and it's as uncreative as it is uninteresting. Hands up who still pays attention to these things? No? We thought not. With that in mind, **games™** recommends the simple act of making a story more succinct, showing rather than telling, and relying on a player's intelligence for them to figure out what's going on.

02



DO LET GO OF OUR HAND AT SOME POINT

✓

NOTABLE EXAMPLES

- Dark Souls series
- Bayonetta
- Super Meat Boy

THE CURSE of the tutorial running for a dozen hours casts a dark shadow over modern gaming. Most of us have been playing these things for a long time, yet almost every new game coming out demands to hold our hand and explain to us the basics we all have burned into our synapses by now. But some aren't afraid to throw you in at the deep end, using their hand not to hold yours, but to slap you in the face. This tough love doesn't suit everyone, true, but when you finally do manage to keep your head above water in *Dark Souls*, it's one of life's true victories. And you *earned* it.

03

DON'T PUT WATER IN YOUR GAME UNLESS WE CAN SWIM IN IT

X

NOTABLE EXAMPLES
- Grand Theft Auto III & Vice City
- Red Dead Redemption
- Batman: Arkham series

MASTER CHIEF sinks like a stone, Batman refuses to do the bat-paddle, John Marston is an absolute badass until water hits his waist and Claude and Tommy were almost incompetent around water enough to make us hate their respective games. Admittedly, the inability to swim isn't *always* bad – in fact, it was handled well in *The Last Of Us*, where NPC Ellie was unable to swim. It made sense from a narrative perspective (when would she have learned?), and the fact she was petrified of the water made for a tenser experience around the wet stuff. But generally speaking, if it's there, we should be able to frolic and splash without fear.

04

DON'T MAKE UNLOCKING THINGS WEIRDLY COMPLICATED

NOTABLE EXAMPLES
- The Evil Within
- Resident Evil series
- The Legend Of Zelda series

THIS IS a crime so ingrained with *Resident Evil*, we were surprised to see it pop up anywhere else. Except for *The Evil Within*, which was made by the man who made *Residen*… oh. The former sees you picking up gems and animal plaques to open up a police break room, while the latter asks you to perform laser surgery on still-living heads which are no longer attached to their bodies. Then there are doors like those in the *Zelda* games, which unlock once all enemies are dead. *Who makes locks like that?!* Obviously just keys – or kicking doors down – would be boring, but there must be another way to do it that's less… weird.



X

05

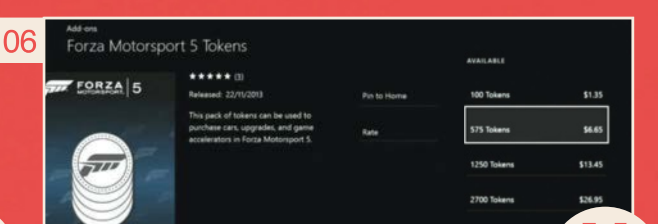
DO KEEP LITTERING GAMES WITH RED BARRELS

✓

NOTABLE EXAMPLES
- Doom
- Metal Gear Solid V
- Call of Duty series

IT'S ONE of the most complained-about elements in all of gaming. 'Why', the person asks, 'do all of these enemy combatants gather gleefully around a thin-walled container clearly filled with volatile, explosive matter?' It's a fair question, but there's no reason to stop with the explosive barrels of doom. Why? Because they're still great fun to use as a room-clearing tool. The satisfaction of taking out multiple enemies with one shot still fills us with the urge to fistpump wildly. Yes, they're overdone. Yes, they're obvious. Yes, the bad guys shouldn't camp around them. But no, they shouldn't be removed – they're way too much fun.

06



DON'T BRING F2P INTO PREMIUM TITLES

X

NOTABLE EXAMPLES
- Forza Motorsport 5
- Dead Space 3
- FIFA Ultimate Team

PEOPLE WERE so sickened by *Forza 5*'s need to fleece players of extra money that all microtransactions have been excised from *Forza 6*. On the other side of things, though, is *FIFA Ultimate Team*, which is still doing very well from its desire to charge players more money for a game they've already spent a fair bit of cash on. There's also the sickening 'pay to cheat' element that's been doing the rounds for years now. What once was a test of memory and dexterity – or just reading ability – is now something you pay actual, real money for. We're sure this is more a publisher-side problem than development, but still: come on devs, help us out here.

07



DON'T EMPLOY OVER-EAGER DLC PRACTISES

NOTABLE EXAMPLES

- Uncharted 4: A Thief's End
- Batman: Arkham Knight
- Evolve

UNCHARTED 4: A Thief's End released its first pack of three add-ons six months before the actual main game released – so certainly at least nine months before the DLC itself was set to be available. *Batman: Arkham Knight* offered players plenty of cost on top of their original purchase, should they want a few pointless trinkets and tiny additional modes. *Evolve* took things a little far. We're not against DLC – expansion packs back in the day were fantastic, and some modern downloadable content has been great. But there's an over-eagerness to rush something out there – even if it is only the chance to pre-purchase something that isn't out for almost a year – and it leaves a bitter taste in the mouth.

08

DO BE INFLUENCED BY FAR CRY… WITHIN REASON

NOTABLE EXAMPLES

- Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag
- Metal Gear Solid V
- Dying Light

FAR CRY 3 was an unexpected gem, coming along and blowing away the expectations of many a gamer. Its mix of open-world exploration, outpost-capturing, RPG-like upgrades and everything else was a refreshing, interesting mix of styles that worked together seamlessly and felt truly unique. It was obvious that the style would be copied in other games, and it has been – from Ubi's other series, *Assassin's Creed*, to zombie-smashers like *Dying Light*. Sometimes it feels a bit much, a bit like there were no ideas beyond 'Let's do what *Far Cry* did', but sometimes you get a *Metal Gear Solid V*, where the basic ideas are taken, toyed with and turned into something *even better*.



09



X

DON'T MIX ON AND OFFLINE TO THE DETRIMENT OF PLAYERS

NOTABLE EXAMPLES

- Sim City
- Elite: Dangerous
- Metal Gear Solid V

WE LIVE in a connected world. The average European, North American or Japanese person probably isn't more than ten steps from something that can get them online. So it would seem an obvious step for publishers to make their games have to be online all the time, or introduce online elements to single-player. When it works well, you get *Dark Souls* or *Journey*. When it doesn't, you get failures like *Sim City*, outrage-bait like *Elite: Dangerous*, small features that end up slowing down all of the menus like *Metal Gear Solid V*. We're not against being connected, but *please* don't make it have a visible, negative impact on single-player.

10



X

DON'T TAKE SO MANY CUES FROM MMOS

NOTABLE EXAMPLES

- Dragon Age: Inquisition
- Kingdoms Of Amalur: Reckoning
- The Witcher III: Wild Hunt

THAT IS unless, of course, you *are* making an MMO. But single-player games are increasingly borrowing ideas and mechanics from their online brethren, and it's beginning to impact on our enjoyment. It's mainly RPGs, but it has spread to other areas, bringing with it the endless need to collect and re-collect ten thingies for no discernable reason, then re-re-collect them and so on and so forth. It's not necessarily that it isn't enjoyable, it's more that we want to put the games down and leave the house sometimes, and they won't let us.



DON'T WHITEWASH MASS MURDER

NOTABLE EXAMPLES
- Spec Ops: The Line
- Uncharted series
- Grand Theft Auto series

11

THE LOVEABLE rogue Nathan Drake: body count in the thousands. Gordon Freeman, theoretical physicist and icon to millions: killed dozens, if not hundreds, of people with families. The characters of *Grand Theft Auto* we're supposed to play as and connect to: horrible, terrible, irredeemable people. The need for our main characters to just kill is old hat, and needs to – ironically – die off. At least *Spec Ops: The Line*, for all its hypocrisies and faults, tried something different by showing the impact on the main character's mental health as he violently murders his way through Dubai. More thought, less slaught...er.





DON'T MAKE EVERY HELICOPTER CRASH

NOTABLE EXAMPLES
- Resident Evil
- Resident Evil 2
- Resident Evil 3
- Resident Evil 4
- Resident Evil 5
- Resident Evil 6

MIKE, OH Mike. Poor Mike. He lasted all of a few seconds in *RE4* before plummeting to his death, leaving a devastated Leon Kennedy – his friend of a couple of minutes – behind. But what did Mike expect? As we all know, unless it's the rescue helicopter at the end of the game, your chopper will crash. It just will. It might be for good reasons, it might be for bad, but whatever the case, your whirlybird is going down – probably in zombie-infested territory. This does happen in other games, but it's classic *Resi*.



DON'T BOTHER WITH ANY TURRET/ON-RAILS SECTIONS

NOTABLE EXAMPLES
- Toy Soldiers: War Chest
- Battlefield series, Call of Duty series

UBISOFT'S *TOY Soldiers* might as well be called *Turret Simulator 2016*, the amount of time it has you sitting in a static weapon firing half-aimlessly at onrushing enemies. But that sort of fits, because it's a tower defence game – where it gets annoying is when, again, we're on the back of a truck with a grenade launcher, or entering a sandbagged bunker with a mounted machine gun, or have our agency taken away from us and are forced to stay still pointing a reticule at a bunch of spawning enemies. Yawn.



DO PRACTICE PLAYING, NOT SHOWING

NOTABLE EXAMPLES
- Mad Max
- The Darkness series
- Resident Evil series

EARLY ON in *Max Payne*, the player makes an exciting escape from an exploding tanker, weaving through falling debris. But you don't *play* that, you just watch it. *Resident Evil* is littered with scenes where characters suddenly become superpowered during a cutscene, only to return to being unable to open a bedside drawer a few seconds later. At least in *The Darkness*, where your pissy ability to smash lights is replaced with a cutscene-only helicopter takedown, it makes narrative sense. The rest of the time, this is just annoying.

"LOVABLE NATHAN DRAKE: BODY COUNT IN THE THOUSANDS"

15



DO MAKE YOUR INSURMOUNTABLE OBSTACLES ACTUALLY INSURMOUNTABLE

NOTABLE EXAMPLES
- Everybody's Gone To The Rapture
- Gears Of War series
- The Last Of Us

WE'RE NOT dim – we know you have to put boundaries in your levels and maps, otherwise you'd have to make endless worlds, taking decades to finish making a game. But please, developers, can't you do something more than putting a knee-high wall that somehow stops our intrepid scavengers or burly, pin-headed chainsaw-gun wielders from getting past? Or – in the case of *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* – a small fence with a police car parked next to it. It's a rare case where our actually-quite-limited abilities in real life far surpass those we're offered in these game worlds. Yes, Marcus Fenix, we can lift our legs higher than you.

16

DON'T FALL BACK ON THE ONE-MAN ARMY

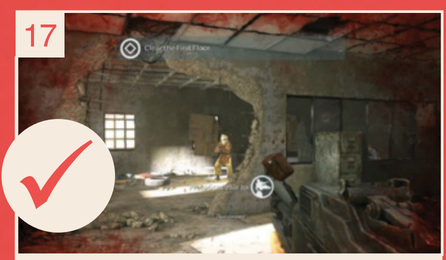
NOTABLE EXAMPLES

■ God Of War series ■ Assassin's Creed series ■ Call Of Duty series

IT MIGHT surprise you to hear, but the *Call Of Duty* series actually began as something of an antithesis to this very issue, railing against the one-man-armyism of then-top dog, *Medal Of Honor*. Since these early days of feeling part of a large fighting force, though, the series has deteriorated to one of the all-conquering, 'does 99% of everything alone', hero. It's not limited to *COD*, of course, and it even stretches eastward to the world of JRPGs. From the 'chosen one' motif, through to the almost literal one-man armies like *Crisis Core*'s Zack. Come on, devs – let's move beyond *Commando* logic and into more modern, nuanced gaming, shall we?

"LET'S MOVE BEYOND COMMANDO LOGIC"

17



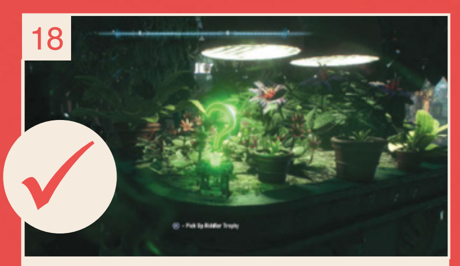
DO CARRY ON WITH THIS HEALTH REGENERATION THING

NOTABLE EXAMPLES

■ Mass Effect 3 ■ Metal Gear Solid V
■ Splatoon

ANOTHER TARGET of the mob that loves easy targets: regenerating health. But when done right, regenerating health can be a huge boon to an experience. In *Metal Gear Solid V*, for example, health only regenerates when you are still, and you obviously cannot be still in a firefight – but you can still fight. Do you stay and fight, or run? This dynamic would not exist with the series' former system of rations, automatically applied when close to death. It adds a whole new angle on things.

18



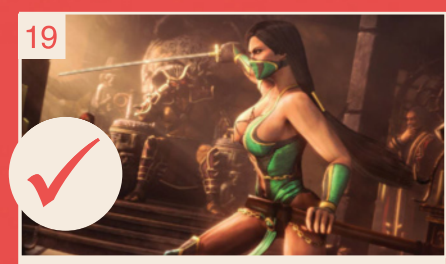
DO GIVE US SOME PADDING

NOTABLE EXAMPLES

■ Batman: Arkham Knight ■ Assassin's Creed series ■ Metal Gear Solid V

IT'S OFTEN too much – who ever bothered with all the feathers in *Assassin's Creed II*? But sometimes when you're loving an experience and you want it to go on forever, you're happy to see a bit of padding. As long as things stay clear of the MMO route, everyone can be happy – longer (good) games, actual variety in what you're doing, the ability to play and re-play brilliant, fun mini-missions. Seriously, we could replay all of *MGSV*'s side-ops five times each and still not get bored with it. And who doesn't love finding *Batman*'s Riddler trophies?

19



DO TREAT WOMEN AS PEOPLE

NOTABLE EXAMPLES

■ Dragon Age series ■ Metal Gear Solid V
■ Mortal Kombat series

MAYBE ONE day this will happen across the board, though it didn't in *Metal Gear Solid V* – a particularly annoying example, considering the game featuring near-nude Quiet was preceded by the Boss in *MGS3*. But progress is being made – *Dragon Age* slipped up in the second iteration, but *Inquisition* was a fantastic show of equality on all fronts. *Mortal Kombat* – and most fighters – meanwhile, seems to think that including female warriors makes up for the fact that half of them wear nothing more than a few small, dyed napkins. It's time to grow up.





20



DO USE DIFFERENT VOICE ACTORS

NOTABLE EXAMPLES

■ BioShock Infinite ■ Uncharted series ■ Destiny

ACCORDING TO most games released in the past five years, there are only two voice actors in the entire world of gaming: Nolan North and Troy Baker. Now, we're not about to claim either is bad at their job – both are very good, and both are genuinely nice people. We begrudge them nothing. But we would, for once, like to hear different voices in our games, rather than being followed around by a hovering Nathan Drake in *Destiny* or a strange, gun-toting hipster Booker DeWitt in *Metal Gear Solid V*. We're pretty sure there are plenty of professionals out there just waiting for the call, and we're double sure North and Baker could do with a bit of a rest.



> “My favourite games are isometric RPGs, so Pillars Of Eternity, Wasteland 2, Baldur’s Gate”
>
> **FELICIA DAY, ACTOR**



WHY I ❤...

WASTELAND 2

FELICIA DAY, ACTOR, AUTHOR, PRESENTER

“Some of my favourite games are the Ultima *games, because that’s what got me into videogames. And, of course,* World Of Warcraft, *which influenced who I am today. My favourite games are isometric RPGs, so* Pillars Of Eternity, Wasteland 2, Baldur’s Gate*... So if I was going to pick one format to play games in forever, that would be it. But, I mean,* Wasteland 2 *is one that’s really stood out over the last couple of years as one of my favourites. I really got into that game and its unique setting. I just loved it.”*

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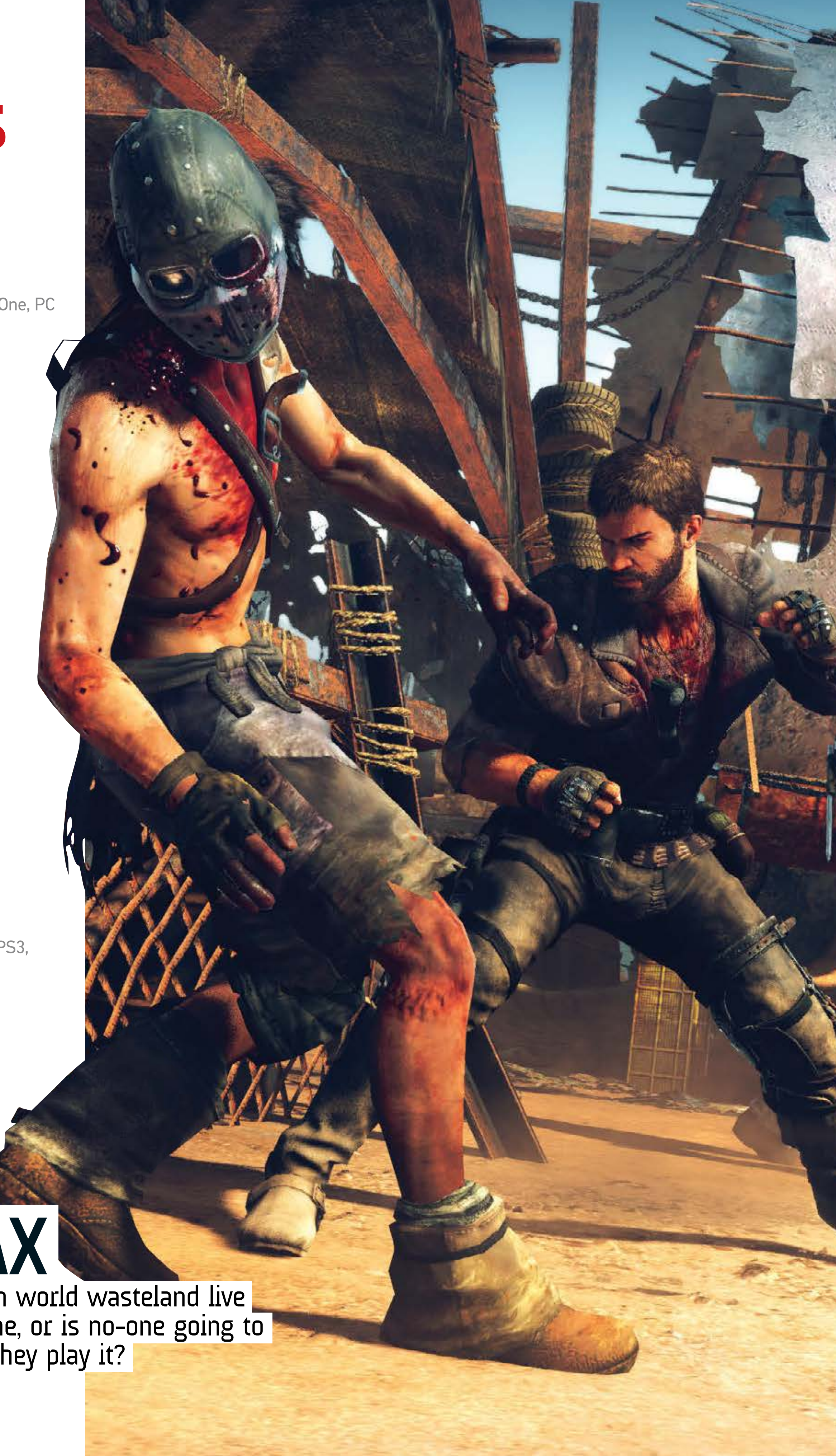
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Reviews



80

MAD MAX

Can Avalanche's open world wasteland live up to the series' name, or is no-one going to have a lovely day if they play it?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

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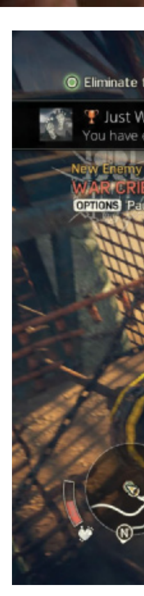
THERE IS A SERIOUS LACK OF DEPTH UNDERPINNING THE PRETTY WORLD THE DEVELOPER HAS PLASTERED OVER THE GAME'S SPARSE MECHANICS

Look behind you, at dune after dune of drifting, half-forgotten terrors...

LOSE HOPE, ALL WHO ENTER HERE

Where *Fury Road* proved a strong step forward for gender equality in the media and showed a broader Hollywood audience how to write a female protagonist (hint: it's basically the same as writing male protagonists), the game incarnation of *Mad Max* settles for something a lot less… progressive. Rather, the only real female character in the game is a literal sex object (called Hope) who becomes a love interest for Max and only makes all the villains more, well, villainous. It's your typical damsel in distress via videogames, and while that might have a place in something more deconstructive, we've seen everything Hope's arc contains before, and by now we're simply bored of it. She could have been a Furiosa-esque badass, but instead she was window-dressing, and that's just distressing.







IF YOU CAN'T FIX WHAT'S BROKEN, YOU'LL, UH… YOU'LL GO INSANE

Mad Max

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Avalanche Studios
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Left: Max himself is supposedly a passive part of the world he's in… at least in the films. In the game, he's more a mindless agent of chaos, sadly.

***Mad Max* is one of the most nebulous open world games we've played. That's both good and bad.** If you're the kind of gamer that likes to 'reformat' the maps you're playing in, *Mad Max* isn't for you – the tasks are repetitive, the environment is uninspired and the combat is piecemeal and inconsistent. If you're the kind of gamer that likes to tackle an open world in small mouthfuls, section-by-section, playing for a few hours at a time, then maybe this is the game for you.

However, we urge anyone that enjoys the work of George Miller and wants to lose themself in his vision of the Wasteland to stay away. The game actually feels insulting to the world Miller presents in his films, derivative of his ideas, lacking any of the creative ingenuity the cinematic versions of *Mad Max* revel in. Instead, the game relies on the world established in the cinematic universe to draw players in, and does incredibly little to further that vision. If you want to play this game as an extension to the fiction, *don't*. Well, it's more like you can't. It might be a functional open-world game, but it's a pretty bad *Mad Max* game.

MISSING LINK

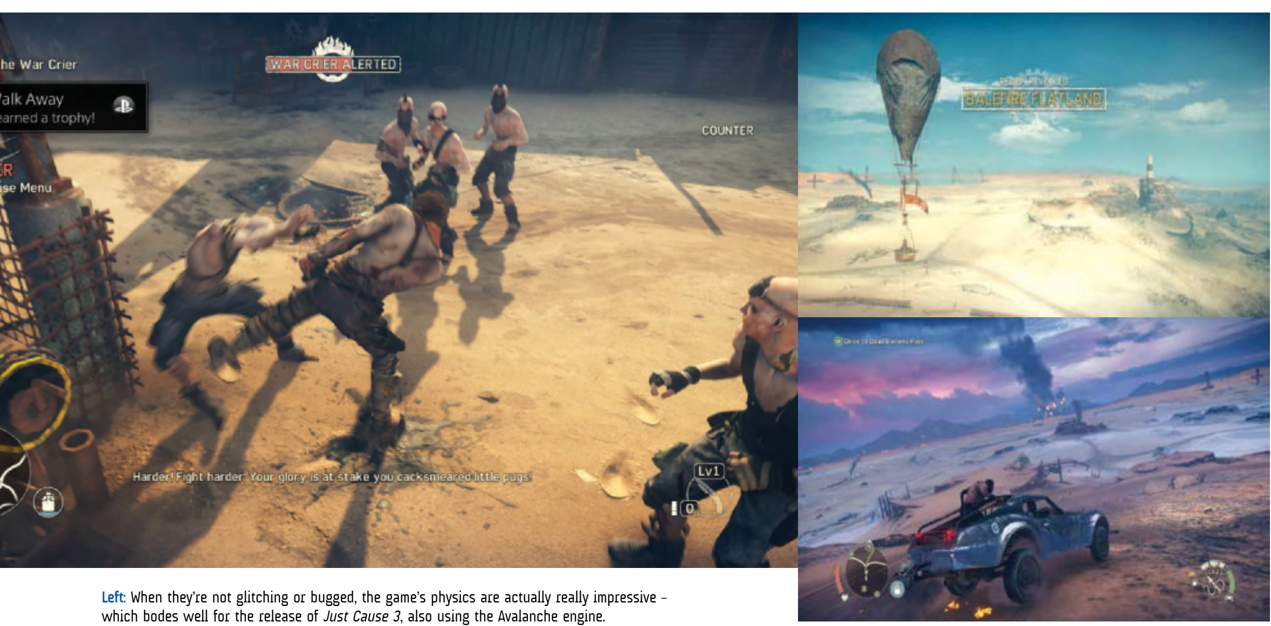
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ROAD RAGE: If the game focussed more on convoy chases – think Big Rigs, motorbikes, kamikaze enemies – there could have been a genuine *Mad Max* vibe. As it is, there's too much aimless wandering.

The map – which is needlessly huge – is a barren empty waste. On an aesthetic level, that kind of lines up with what the licence is about: you're Max, *the* Max, prowling the Wasteland trying to find some solace from your own dwindling mind. On a gameplay level, it makes the game a tedious drag – until you can upgrade your car and make it the fastest, meanest wrecking machine in the country, driving around the sandiest sandbox is just boring. There is a serious lack of depth underpinning the pretty world the developer has plastered over the game's sparse mechanics that really could have done with a little more thought and time.

Yeah, maybe you can take down a Scarecrow here or kill a Sniper there, but after 30 of these identical tasks, even these moments of entertainment start to wear thin. We felt like we were driving through *Mad Max* on tyres of perishing rubber – every monotonous task we had to complete balding our tyres more until we got about halfway through and we just mentally crashed.

By that point, our patience had worn rather thin. To progress through main story missions, you've



Left: When they're not glitching or bugged, the game's physics are actually really impressive – which bodes well for the release of *Just Cause 3*, also using the Avalanche engine.



Left: The game's vistas and vantage points are really where it shines – we just wish there was more populating the interim areas

got to intermittently tackle a variety of the other tasks scattered throughout the Wasteland. With fast-travel points rationed out appallingly scarcely, and the points being tedious to unlock in and of themselves, being forced to the corners of the land in order to progress *really* affects the game's pace. Another part of the pace problem is that – oddly – *Mad Max* makes you hold a button to do *everything*. Hold to get out the car, hold to blow things up, hold to pull things down, hold to get water, hold to use water. It's weird, and it makes scavenging the Wasteland so much more of a chore than it should be. Pair that with the occasionally top-heavy movements of Max and the myriad physics glitches, and it makes for a really arrhythmic experience.

In our experience, there are two kinds of gamers drawn to open world games: the completionists that like to tick off every objective, climb every tower, and collect every item they can, and the story-driven players that like to push through the main game, get powerful, and finish off the main side missions when they're good and ready. Somehow, *Mad Max* appeals to neither of those player archetypes – rather, it falls flat on both story missions (which make you do slightly longer versions of the side missions) and all the extra-curricular stuff that just repeats itself to the point of tedium.

Mad Max feels like it's trying too hard to be *Shadow Of Mordor,* designed by a Warner Bros. committee, derivative of all the most popular Warner Bros. games so far without really identifying what makes any of them great. The combat, for example, is basically *Batman* minus the gadgets… which was the one thing that made *Batman* really stand out. You can get away with just mashing the attack button until you get a parry prompt, carry on mashing, then (again) hold the button down to do some brutal finishers once you hit Fury mode… which isn't even that different to the standard combat mode. The extra upgrades you can acquire don't exactly make things easier – they just quicken the process of killing the wait-in-line idiots that surround you as you wail on them.

When combat tries to make things more tricky – by dropping in War Criers that can buff their allies or giving armoured, shielded thugs a pop at you – you can use *exactly* the same tactics, but you'll just have to be a bit more careful of dodging moves, or wail on enemies a bit longer. If you've got the nouse to upgrade your shotgun and ammo belt as soon as possible, too, the game offers little-to-no challenge for the first 20 hours. After that, it's only your car that'll make things a bit harder.

And so we get to car combat – the one thing that *Mad Max* has been marketing itself on. It's perfectly functional and interesting… but only once you get to the latter game. At the start, you're basically driving a rusty husk of metal around a sandy wasteland. You've no armour, an underpowered shotgun and no serious vehicular weaponry. If this section of the game (probably the first 15-20 hours) is supposed to make you feel vulnerable, make you scared of the Wasteland, ramp up the tension… then it failed. Instead, it just makes the driving sections for the first half of the game a chore: you can be the best driver around, but your speed will hold you back and you'll have to fend off attackers with precious shotgun rounds. Unlock the harpoon and car combat suddenly gets a *lot* more exciting (ripping drivers out of their seats and smearing them along the sand was our highlight), but things still take longer than feels right.

Most of the early game takes place on foot anyway (except when you're forced to drive around

FAQs

Q. DOES IT HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH FURY ROAD?
No. The only lore it shares with the wider *Mad Max* universe is the name of the character, the idea of a Wasteland and that damn leg brace.

Q. HOW MAD IS MAX?
Apart from the serial murdering, we'd actually say he's pretty sane. Oh, he does like eating dog food, though.

Q IS THERE MUCH TO DO?
Yes and no: yes, there are a lot of activity markers to check off, but no – they're not very varied or exciting.



Right: You can hijack other enemy vehicles and use them against the thugs of your main enemy, Scrotus, if you so desire. They won't have as many 'toys' as your old vehicle, though.





Above: Photo Mode allows you to strip back the HUD and enjoy *Mad Max*'s admittedly exemplary graphics – everything but the character models look incredible.

MAD MAX IS THE EPITOME OF A MEDIOCRE GAME

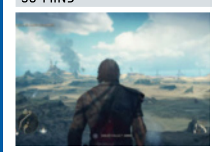
Below: The Wasteland is *huge* in-game, but there's really not that much to do. Credit to the development team for trying to fill it, though



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

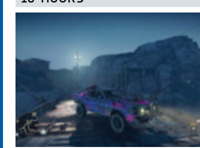
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



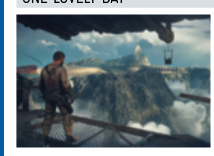
Hey, this is great: driving is fun, feels gritty and powerful, and the combat is actually really crunchy, like a heavier version of *Batman*.

10 HOURS



Is... is this it? We've killed Top Dogs, taken down strongholds and done loads of Story stuff... but it all feels oddly the same?

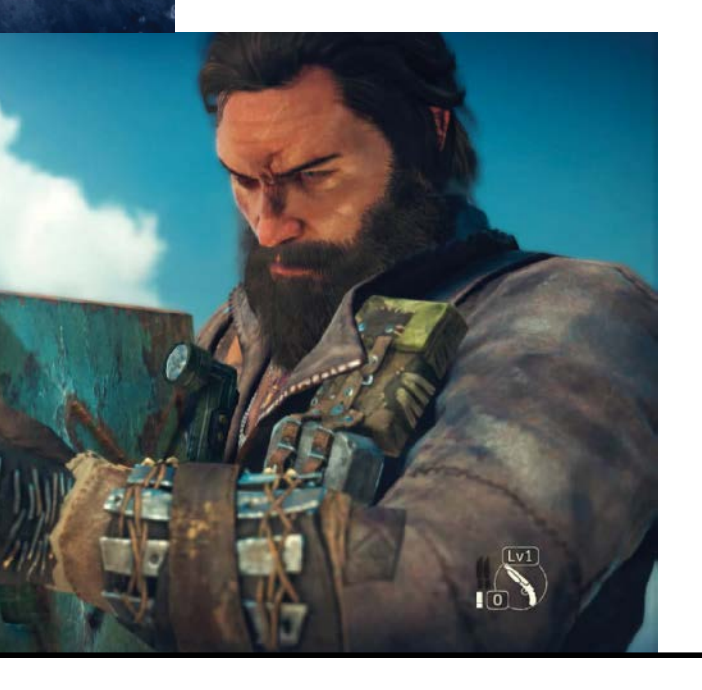
ONE LOVELY DAY



Story's done... and made very little sense. We guess we could go and pull down all the Scarecrows and kill all the snipers?

UPGRADES FOR DAYS

The upgrades system in *Mad Max* works like your Badass Rank did in *Borderlands 2* – do enough of *everything* and you'll earn the right to level up via tokens you can spend at a moving dispensary through the Wasteland. It's an awful system that made us horde level-up chips 20 at a time, and it's also kind of broken: we hit the top level before we even crossed the halfway point in the game… meaning we had a *lot* of scrap left over and nothing to spend it on because the requirements for unlocking new upgrades could only be met *over* the sealed border area… by the time we were at end-game, we were *stupidly* overpowered and tore through enemies with ease.



the wastes on hapless fetch quests), but when the later game takes to the road, we really began to get a sense of combat fatigue. Bear in mind that we'd been scavenging every available nest, too, and gathering as much scrap as we could for the sake of upgrades. It's an upgrade system that relies too much on one economy – an economy that can easily be broken by spending a night in a sandstorm and raiding the boxes that it'll uncover.

The story is standalone, so anything you'd like in terms of connection to a broader *Mad Max* universe will be absent, and generally, well, it's just pretty poor. The whole story revolves around *building a car* and therefore every bit of character development, emotional connection and player empathy is as deep as you'd expect. We couldn't *stand* any of the characters – none of them are remotely likeable – and the hunchback engineer, Chumbucket, that tags along on car missions with you is in the running for single most annoying companion character in any game, ever.

It looks nice, though, so there's that, right? Sadly not: for every impressive sandstorm or vista, there's a performance bug dragging the game down. We played the game on the PS4, and whenever you run into a convoy (where the game has to process over five cars on screen at once), the frame-rate dropped significantly. The same was true whenever more than three cars crossed into more technically demanding terrain (Pink Eye's territory, for example). There are also physics glitches that happen seemingly randomly, some causing us to reboot our saves.

On the upside, the game's sound design is spectacular – some of the best in the open world field, to be fair – and everything works as it should. And here's our point: *Mad Max* is a perfectly functional game, just not a great one. We're sure it'll appeal to certain types of gamers, but how it uses its licence without really doing anything special with it puts us off. It's the most beige bit of games writing we've seen this year from a triple-A studio, and the gameplay itself – whilst not *bad* – certainly isn't good, either. *Mad Max* is the epitome of a mediocre game, and you could do worse than picking this up for £10 in a Steam sale or something similar.

Otherwise, it's a game that highlights all the problems an open world sandbox could possibly hit these days. It feels like a game-by-numbers: the straight-to-video spiritual successor to what *Shadow Of Mordor* did last year. But where *Mordor* had at least an interesting story and the Nemesis System underpinning the average rest-of-the-product, *Mad Max* simply has… well, Max. And he's certainly not worth getting that excited over, as sorry as we are to say it.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

EXPLOSIVE ACTION: For all the game's flaws, we can't say it's ugly: the explosions and weather effects show off the Avalanche engine exceptionally well. It's a very pretty, if repetitive, location.

VERDICT

LIGHT GAMEPLAY AND GOOD GRAPHICS, AVERAGE GAME



gamesTMmag scored **5** for
Mad Max
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

DOWN WITH THE SLICKNESS

Forza Motorsport 6

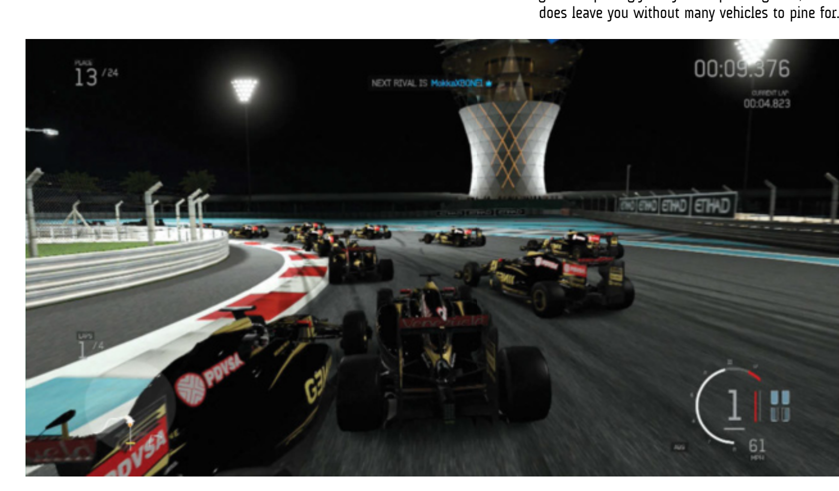
Drawing attention to the extreme good looks of the latest console-exclusive racing game is roughly as trivial as pointing out the dodgy geopolitical subtext of the latest blockbuster FPS, but *Forza Motorsport 6* really is an incontestable powerhouse. What makes it so welcome is that it's an incontestable powerhouse that's also loaded to the rafters with fresh content; the glossy shell of *Forza 5* now reduced to a hazy footnote. Even though that was a hardware launch title, the vast number of new event types, track locations and gameplay modifiers in *Forza 6* make its predecessor look like the slimline demo its detractors always said it was. In fairness to the 2013 iteration though: it did lay an immense deal of integral groundwork.

The stern and sterile yin to *Forza Horizon 2*'s freewheeling yang, *Forza Motorsport 6* is, true to series form, presented in the clinical manner of something that was painstakingly developed in a laboratory. Turn 10 Studios may have implemented some of the Hollywood traits forged by Criterion through its *Burnout* and *Need For Speed* excursions – rousing choppers whirring overhead, overtly dramatic music – but this is a game whose tone is defined by its cutscenes, one of which likens competitive racing to warfare and car manufacturing to a global arms race. In short, it's as self-important and solemn as usual, and if you're a humour deficient petrolhead, you will absolutely adore it. As will pretty much everyone else.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Turn 10 Studios
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-24
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Right: *Forza 6* abandons the standard progress structure of most other *Forza* campaigns, and ushers you towards using some of the best cars in the game surprisingly early. It's a pleasing tack, but it does leave you without many vehicles to pine for.



Above: Thankfully, Mods can only be bought with in-game credits. *Forza 5*'s controversial microtransactions are nowhere to be found.



But one of the game's most welcome new features is also one of its most unexpectedly confounding: rain. Racing in the pouring rain – especially from the cockpit view – is astonishing to behold, and the ways in which rainwater affects tyre traction over time really forces you to think vigorously about your race plan. If you accelerate into a puddle your car almost immediately aquaplanes, and the scenario is not unlike driving over a banana skin in Mario Kart. Maintaining full control is nigh-on impossible, and while this is somewhat realistic, the solution simply involves leaning off the gas whenever you pass through a stretch of water. It's a weirdly simplistic and gamey system to encounter in a simulator, and isn't a particularly exciting one at that.

You can also now race at night, and when you're confident enough to remove some (or all) of the game's many stabilisers, the stage is set for a parade of blistering white-knuckle thrillers that represent the game at its most exciting. What's more, when you start developing a taste for racing outside of your comfort zone, you can start playing with the brand new Mod system to earn rewards. A highly practical interpretation of *Titanfall*'s Burn Card system, mods basically allow you to preemptively gamble on your upcoming performances. While Boost mods (things like advanced grid placements or an XP boost) are discarded after one use, Crew and Dare mods can be kept and re-used until you choose to dispose of them. Many of the

Right: *Forza Motorsport 6*'s weather system isn't dynamic, which is disappointing. On that front, *DriveClub* and *Project CARS* put it well in the shade.

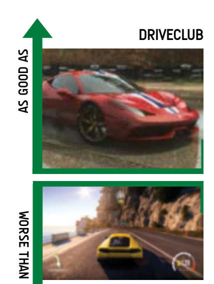


FORZA MOTORSPORT 6 IS PRESENTED IN THE CLINICAL MANNER OF SOMETHING THAT WAS PAINSTAKINGLY DEVELOPED IN A LABORATORY



DRIVECLUB

AS GOOD AS



WORSE THAN

FORZA HORIZON 2

FAQs

Q. HOW DOES IT LOOK?
Predictably special. The gameplay is locked at 60 frames per second now too. Dazzling stuff.

Q. CAN YOU STILL REWIND?
Yes, you're still able to rewind time after a fault. *Forza* still doesn't believe in penalising you for errors.

Q. IS THERE SPLIT-SCREEN?
Sadly you still can't race against AI drivers during split-screen play, but it's a welcome inclusion.



LEAGUE OF ACURA LEGENDS

In addition to the exhilarating chaos of 24-player races, *Forza*'s multiplayer suite is improved no end by the new League system. Leagues are split into several divisions, and your division is dependent on both your skill and aggression. In theory, this is going to result in some legitimately meaningful matchmaking, with combative racers paired with other combative racers. It's too early to tell if the system will work as well as Turn 10 hopes, but it's a savvy and promising experiment. League races are all timed, and work similarly to how Global Events worked in the underrated 2012 *SSX* reboot, with players gaining an amount of credits that's dictated by their placement when the league closes.



Crew modifications are track-specific, gifting your with (for example) a 6% grip boost on Road America, or an 8% breaking expansion at Le Mans. Dare mods, meanwhile, are where the fun really starts: they shower you with credits when you restrict your own ability to succeed. You can dismantle the Rewind command, lumber your car with a severe weight surge or lock the camera to a specific viewpoint, and using them to test your mettle always adds a riveting frisson.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

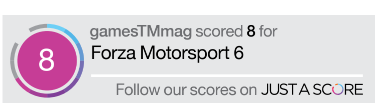
KEEP CALM AND DRIVE: It was often complained that *Forza 5*'s Drivatars were way too keen on running you off the road. In *Forza 6* you're able to limit Drivatar aggression.

It's a great system, and the fact that it adds longevity to the campaign (rather than bolstering multiplayer) is actually a real boon, simply because the single-player portion is so large. The hefty Career mode asks you to ascend through five different "volumes", each one centring on an individual vehicle class, and the fearsome amount of content is never allowed to become monotonous thanks to the aforementioned Mod system and the intermittent appearance of Showcase mode. Showcase events are bountiful and inventive. You can hop from piloting a perilous retro beast to partaking in a passing challenge or knuckling down to a brutal endurance race, and the beauty is that, once unlocked, they're there to be tackled whenever you wish. You are free to decide when you want to take a relaxing breather, or when you want to get stuck into a hardcore night-time Spa race.

The sheer breadth of vehicles available to you is impressive (460 cars compared to *Forza 5*'s 200-odd) but as usual, it's the extent to which you can customise each one, both inside and out, that really impresses. *Forza*'s patented Drivatar system however, continues to be a bit of a mystery. It's undoubtedly compelling to be permanently locked in battle with your friends (in addition to some of *Forza*'s most prominent players) but Drivatar behaviour only sticks out when big mistakes are made. The appeal of overtaking a friend during a lengthy endurance contest after they fluff a straightforward corner remains, but it's plain exasperating when you win a tough race immediately after overtaking a Drivatar who has inexplicably spun out during the final stretch, after six laps of pitch perfect racing.

Forza Motorsport 6 is not the conclusive leap that some fans were expecting. It feels like more astute groundwork; more prep for the definitive seventh instalment. It doesn't feel hollow or lacking in content; it's a cautious and discreet update that still feels, to its credit, genuinely cutting edge. You probably shouldn't miss it. Just don't expect the ground to break.

VERDICT
A SMART AND CONFIDENT UPDATE



A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

FIFA 16

Women's football is *FIFA 16*'s marquee new feature; an addition that realistically should have come a lot sooner – but let's stick with the positives. It's here. It's featured. It's not half-baked. But it is relegated to the bottom right of the menu, you've only got two modes to play (single matches or tournaments) and team selection is national sides only. Somewhat fittingly, women's football is similar to how men's football was featured in the original *FIFA International Soccer* back in 1993. Ah well, baby steps.

So, the important question: how is it actually using the women's teams? Well, they play football. Some might have expected some differences between the men's and women's games, but there really isn't much – perhaps the female game relies more on pace and trickery than the men's, while the chaps have a stronger aerial game… but honestly, that could be totally wrong: they're just very similar. Both feature the new bits – the on-screen prompts of the Trainer, a feature introduced for beginners but one that can teach old hacks new ways of playing; the 'pass with purpose' function, an awkward button combo (R1/RB and pass) that results in playing the ball somewhere between a through ball and a normal ball; no-touch dribbling, which gives players an utterly pointless feature that hardly anyone will use – it's all there.

Women don't see most of the other modes, though – you're not going to be taking part in *FIFA 16*'s mildly revamped career mode with the women, for example. With the men you can go through this section, of course, and you too can be disappointed that training – where you choose up to five players each week to drill in certain ways, allowing stats to be increased and younger players to develop quicker – all feels thoroughly gimmicky and like a wad more padding in a mode that doesn't need to waste more of your time. Everything else in career mode – the continuing focus on scouting, the improved array of tournaments and grounds on show and so on – is a good distraction and a fine way to sink single-player time into the game, but it does feel like it doesn't get the love certain other modes, featured in a boxout on these pages, do.

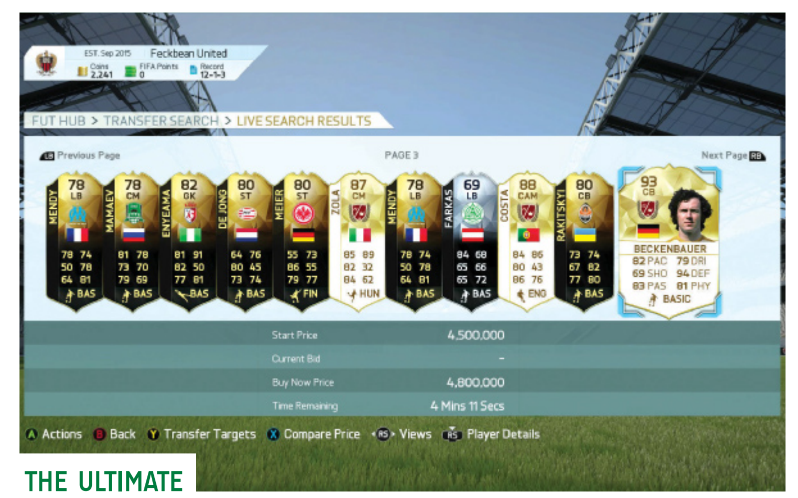
In all of *FIFA 16*'s pre-release hype, there wasn't much talk of the big new features of the game proper. It turns out that's with good

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: EA Sports
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-22
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

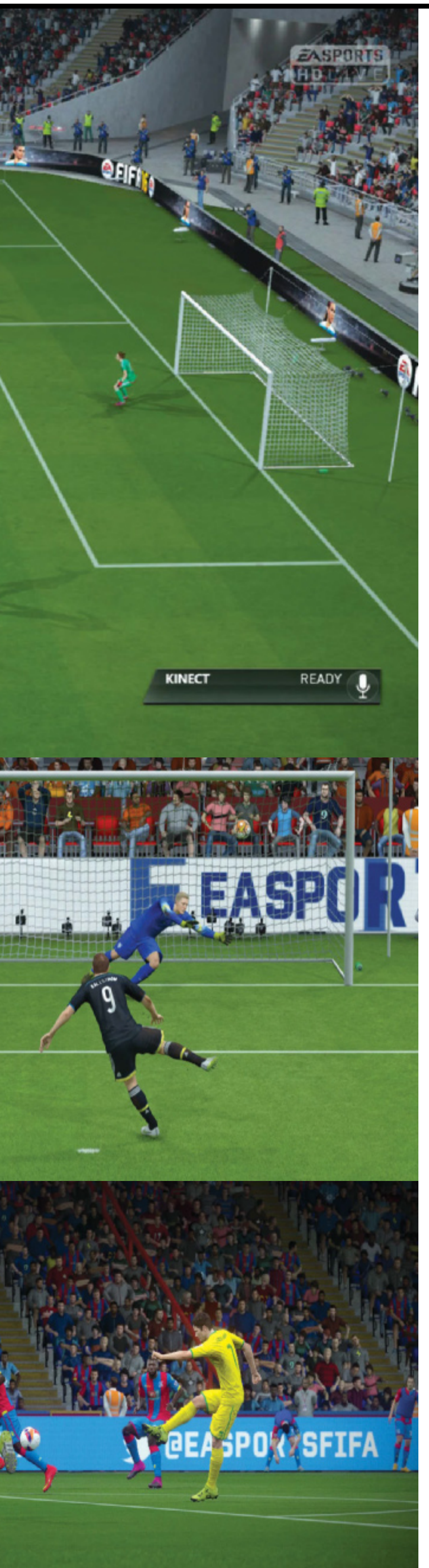


Above: Extra functions through Kinect or the PlayStation Camera return in *FIFA 16*, and unlike many other games are things you might find yourself actually using. A desperate scream of 'all out attack' in the 89th minute genuinely adds an element of excitement. **Right:** Playing online is still a mix of fun and frustrating, but then that's the allure of competitive play.



THE ULTIMATE

FIFA 16's focus is heaped on FIFA Ultimate Team, EA's absurdly popular sticker book-style mode. The big new feature is FUT Draft, where you play with a high-rated team, taking them through a tournament of four games to earn prizes you're unable to purchase normally. It's fun, and the prizes on offer – always at least of the 15,000 coin value entry fee – are good encouragement to play. Elsewhere, everything is pretty much as it was – the market is continually being monitored to make sure scammers don't get the upper hand, and while there is a focus on paying real money to get more out of it, FUT is perfectly playable without laying down extra cash. In fact, after 30 games or so even the most strident anti-microtransaction player will likely throw down an extra couple of quid and not mind in the slightest.



BETTER THAN



FIFA 14

WORSE THAN

PES 2016

FAQs

Q. I DON'T LIKE FOOTBALL
Not a question, but yeah – you're not going to change your mind. *FIFA 16* makes efforts to bring in beginners, but it's still a tough sell to non-football fans.

Q. IS IT GOOD LOOKING?
Absolutely – *FIFA 16* is a head-turner with regards to looks and presentation. This is the closest we've seen to actual, broadcast-quality style.

Q. IS BARNET IN IT?
Yes, and many other ludicrous/brilliant teams too. Lower league football is often ignored in games, but not here.

reason: this is a refined game, not one that's seen much in the way of changes. Even so, the tweaks and smaller changes *FIFA 16* has seen on the pitch itself have had a fair bit of impact, and it's certainly not all been for the better.

Some changes are great, like the tweaks to defending to make it so your back line is able to pull a tackle out in more areas, at more speeds and with more angles. Tactical defending – the feature introduced back in *FIFA 12* – is still a mixed bag; ideal for the hardcore professionals who need all the control they can get, but a bit too loose and uncertain for the beginners. The new minor defending tweaks in *FIFA 16* make some headway towards fixing this for less skilful players, but honestly a lot of people will still be switching the option back to legacy defending.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

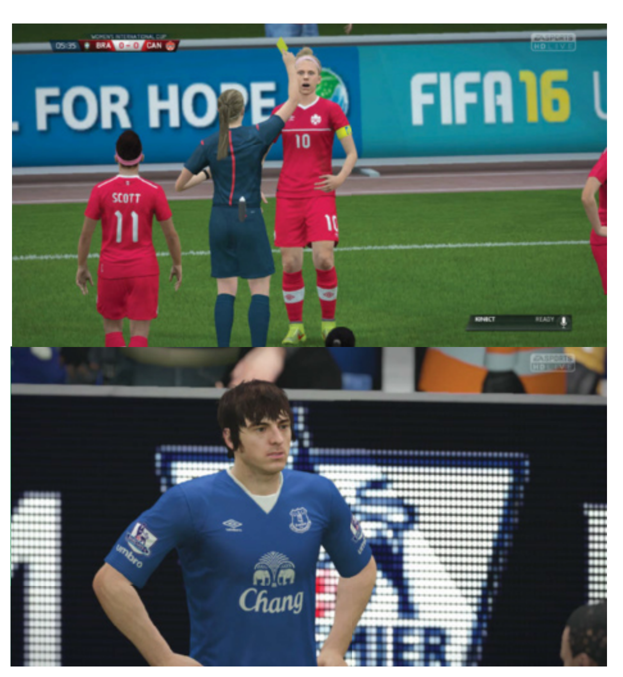
LEVEL FIELD: After being ignored for decades, women are now in *FIFA*. The players look the part and are accurately skilled, and presentational/commentary aspects fully support the mode. A good start.

Other little changes on the field come in the shape of things like speed being less of a win-all stat. It's something EA acknowledged as being an irritation of previous *FIFA*s, but the way the studio has 'fixed' the power of pace seems to have been… well, to nerf it. Fast players are still fast, and given enough space they will pelt off down the wing away from all-comers, but generally speaking it feels much like *FIFA 16* has just slowed down on-the-ball control a little bit, and/or given a little boost of speed to the defending player/s. It feels clumsy as a solution and often leads to frustration, but this is a much lesser evil than the godlike prowess of pacey players in the past.

Crossing has been tweaked, but on the default setting it seems to go to the opposition keeper 75% of the time – switch that to manual in the options and the problem is fixed. Interceptions and blocks have been upgraded, meaning players are now more 'intelligent' and able to get in the way more often. This leads to situations – especially against the AI – where very few of your passes over a couple of metres in distance will get to their intended target. Hopefully this will see further balancing tweaks with updates, because right now it's an off-putting and deeply frustrating element of *FIFA 16*'s single-player modes.

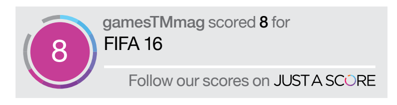
YOU'RE NOT GOING TO BE TAKING PART IN FIFA 16'S MILDLY REVAMPED CAREER MODE WITH THE WOMEN

Beyond that, *FIFA 16* doesn't see any real, notable changes on the pitch. You know what to expect from it, and you really won't be disappointed with what the game offers. It feels snappier than the last few years of the series has done, and the addition of women's football – admittedly 22 years after the series began – is a huge step into opening the *FIFA* series up to a whole new audience for the first time since those first few licensed tracks were included to lure in a more casual audience. But there is a stronger sense of ennui with *FIFA 16* than we've felt in the last six or seven years: functional changes are minor, tweaks still need some balancing and the whole thing does have a slight stench of staleness to it. It's still great, but next year we do hope EA concentrates on what's in the game less, and more about what's fun to play.



Above: Player likenesses are better than ever, and more faces than ever have sat through the scanning process with EA's equipment. Unfortunately we still don't get scans of lower league players, so no Lanre Oyebanjo yet. **Left:** There's still little better in the world than playing a game like *FIFA 16* in local multiplayer. Football games just get that stuff right.

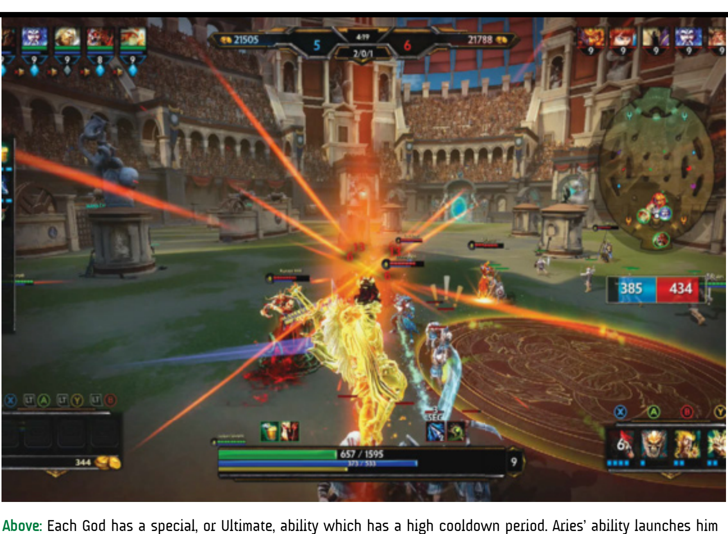
VERDICT
POSITIVE STEPS AND A GOOD GAME, BUT NOTHING MORE



BY THE BEARD OF ZEUS

Smite





Above: Each God has a special, or Ultimate, ability which has a high cooldown period. Aries' ability launches him in the air, shackling other Gods to him with his chains before smashing down and snapping the trapped Gods to him for some up-close face-smashing.

If there ever was a perfect MOBA ambassador for consoles then it was always going to be *Smite*. For better or worse, the game sticks out amongst its MOBA peers by its one defining trait: its third-person perspective. While games such as *League Of Legends* and *Heroes Of The Storm* will never be able to be ported across to consoles thanks to their mandatory keyboard and mouse control scheme, *Smite* was practically born for dual analogue.

On its original release, *Smite* was a well-received and unique MOBA with a small collection of niggles and bugs with its gameplay and systems that tend to come with every free-to-play release. Fast forward a year and a half after its release, though, and you'll discover that Xbox One owners have been treated to a version that is mechanically and economically perfect, relatively bug-free and well on its way to being a giant of the genre. Couple that with a now-thriving community (the game hit a staggering ten million registered users this summer) and a flowering eSports scene with its Smite World Championships then we'd say that there hasn't been a better time to pick *Smite* up than now.

The controls, while not great, are the best they can be on a controller. Hi-Rez has done a decent job at mapping the obtuse and key-hungry control set of a MOBA onto the Xbox One pad and it has done it in a way that's actually intuitive and easy to use. There are some compromises, however. Crucial actions such as activating Active Items require multiple button presses, which become incredibly fiddly in crucial moments of battle and will, more times than not, your timing throw off by a couple of days.

While *Smite* for Xbox One is an admiral port of a very good game, it's obvious that it is still not the definitive way to play it, that title is reserved for the PC version. Keyboard and mouse control scheme superiority aside, the Xbox version suffers from FPS stutter, especially when calling up the scoreboard or shop in-game. Admittedly, this could easily be patched in the future; it's still early days for the game, after all, but in its current state it leads to the occasional outburst of frustration.

So if you want to play *Smite* as a 'purist', then sure grab yourself a half-decent PC, download the game for free and go ahead. If you are the type of person who wants to play it casually, kick on a comfortable sofa with a controller and probably get the same amount of enjoyment out of it, then by the Gods this is for you.

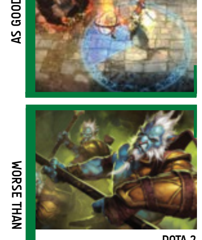
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Hi-Rez Studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-10 (Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

AS GOOD AS

GUARDIANS OF MIDDLE EARTH





WORSE THAN

DOTA 2

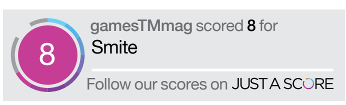
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

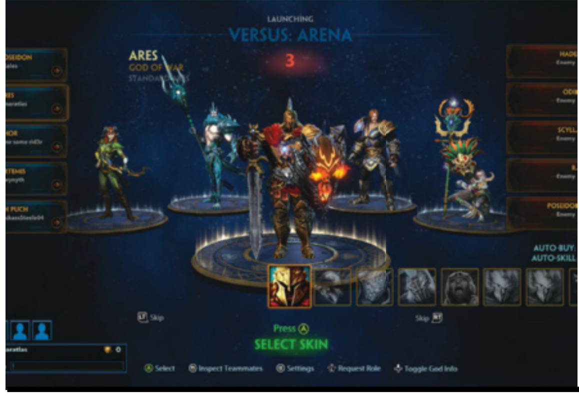
GODS: Most MOBAs have their own original characters, *Smite*, however fills its 69-strong roster with deities from across many different religions from Loki to Kumbhakarna to Aubis.

VERDICT

THE FIRST TRUE MOBA ON CONSOLES



Below: *Smite*'s roster of Gods currently stands at 69, these are then split between the different 'roles': Hunter, Assassin, Mage and Guardian and Warrior. Everyone will have their favourite role, granted, but you'll need to be familiar with each one.



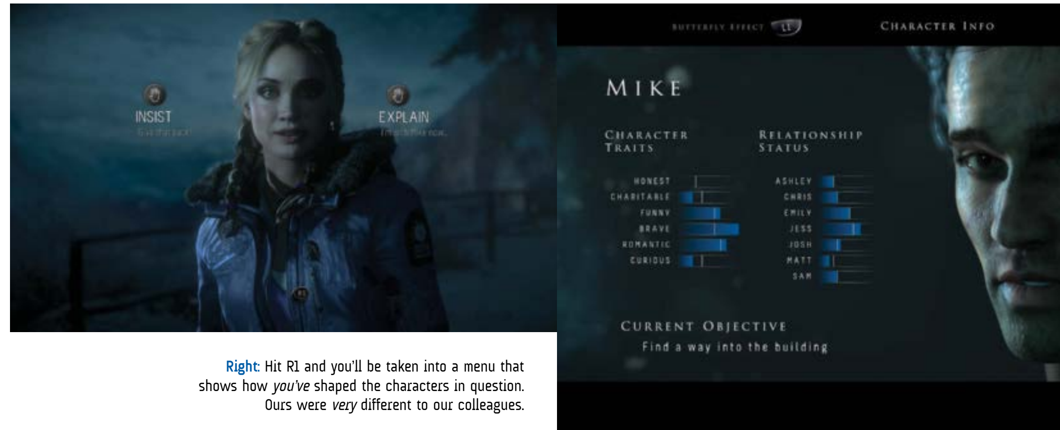




UNTIL DAWN ISN'T A HORROR GAME, IT'S A DREAD SIMULATOR

EXTENDED PLAY

We played this game over a weekend and came back to talk to our sister magazines that had also been playing the game… our outcomes and decisions were more different than we first thought they could be. We've been fervently picking apart each choice, each character, each situation with hunger, trying to figure out how you can make this character live, or what happened to make that character do something they shouldn't. We hope that by the time this goes to print, internet communities haven't spoiled the core of this game, and that it can still be a fresh experience for anyone that wants to go in blind.



Right: Hit R1 and you'll be taken into a menu that shows how *you've* shaped the characters in question. Ours were *very* different to our colleagues.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Supermassive Games
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

CABIN IN THE WOODS: THE GAME

Until Dawn

Let's not mince our words – *Until Dawn* wouldn't exist without Joss Whedon's self-aware horror hit *Cabin In The Woods*. Both *Until Dawn* and the 2012 horror flick are serious critiques of what horror is; both deconstruct the 'torture porn' that modern media has come to associate with the horror/thriller spectrum, both intelligently tackle the objectification/identification of wanting people to be alright but at the same time wanting something *really* bad to happen to them, and both do what they can to readjust that balance by making you – the player/viewer – all too aware of your function within the game's fiction.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. *Until Dawn* starts you out in a cabin on a mountain (surrounded by woods…) which is filled with a gaggle of horny, drunken teenagers. Some are passed out, some are dancing, others are planning a prank – a prank on one of a set of twin sisters that goes horribly wrong, and the sisters run off into the woods where they encounter… something unpleasant. Let's just say it doesn't go well.

Cut to one year later, and you play as a group of eight friends that return to the mountain lodge to mourn the loss of their twin friends. Amongst this group, you've got all the pillars of the typical American horror film of the last 20 years: you've got the 'alpha' jock, the 'beta' jock, the nerdy guy, the popular girl, the geeky girl, the 'girl-next-door', the 'bitch' and that one uneasy odd guy… you play as all of them in a weaving narrative that's somewhere between TV's Lost and a Quantic Dream game written by Telltale. From there, we don't want to go much further into the plot (spoilers abound), but it's safe to say we didn't see many of the myriad twists coming.

The game uses a loose interpretation of 'the butterfly effect' liberally – spraying butterfly imagery over anything that'll take it – and it's incredibly insistent that you remember *every* decision you make via a set of micro story records (butterfly-shaped) on the pause screen that remind you *exactly* what you did, and then, later, perhaps the outcome of that. *Everything* you have any agency over could easily come back and bite you. You may think your actions are for the greater good, but you're likely to be in for some surprises.

So it's a game with many branching paths – think *Life Is Strange*, think Telltale – but its interior workings are masked and deceptive, and the game weaves innocuous decisions in with incredibly important ones, and frames the majority of these in the soap-opera drama of American teenage life. But beneath the surface, something grim bubbles – there are three facets of local events that play into the game's over-arching narrative (something that happened in 1952, something that happened last year, and something that's happening *right now*) and each of these events has a series of clues scattered throughout the story's ten chapters.

The story is smart and self-aware, but it doesn't detract from the odd arrhythmia *Until Dawn* suffers – it's a very light game from a mechanical point of view. Yes, there are some smart input choices ('Don't move' sections – which track the DualShock 4's light bar and won't let you move *at all* are a highlight), but largely this is a visual novel dressed up in a very pretty skin: think, again, Quantic Dream.

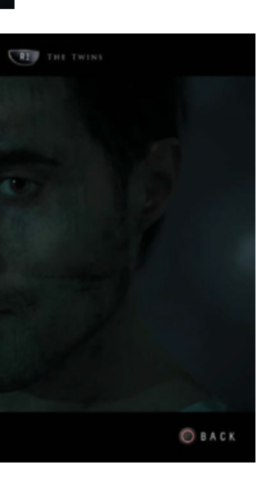
But at least there are collectibles, right? Aside from the slew of clues that you can uncover, there are totems that give you glimpses into the future and can help you (try) and outsmart the game's decision-making process. These also unlock larger points of the past that contextualise the crazy goings-on on the mountain, and give a bit more narrative weight to exactly what's going on.

These collectibles 'game-ify' the whole experience a little too much, though: apart from these moments of breaking out of the action, *Until Dawn* is the most cinematic game we've played on the PS4. Easily. And we say that with respect – it's not a lazy QTE-fest: the game actively knows it's riffing on cinema, and is smart about it, from the slow movement speed of your character(s) right down to the fixed camera angles. To that end, the mocap is flawless and the characters' acting is perfect – Supermassive is a new studio, but it's clear it wants to solidify itself as a visual/graphical master.

It's the myopia between cinematic experience and gameplay that holds *Until Dawn* back – it's a jack-of-all-trades, master of none. If it had focused fully on creating a watertight narrative, or fully on being more mechanically involving, it'd have been the best horror experience of the last few years. Instead, the overtly 'videogame' parts of the experience actually end up holding *Until Dawn* back a little bit, creating this sluggishness in-between the fantastic, revelatory setpieces.

Until Dawn isn't a horror game; rather, it's a dread simulator: every time a character ends up alone, every time you have a run-in with a character that pops up in-between chapters, every time you see *anything* weird… you heart rate ups that little bit more. *Until Dawn* plays with you. It's an extended metaphor for horror games, one that prides itself on how much it predicts – and counteracts – what you're doing. If you care about the advancement of meta-narratives and the player/game relationship, this is for you.

Above: The interactions between the characters are the highlight of the game's writing: the conversations are natural and fluid and even the silly banter is well thought-out.





Above: Sam (played by Hayden Panettiere, of *Heroes* fame) is just one of the colourful, intricate cast that have to wait on the mountain…

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DON'T MOVE: Some of the QTEs and DualShock 4-specific inputs are a fantastic way of manipulating your breathing – in a way that books like *House Of Leaves* or films like *Gravity* have done before.

BETTER THAN



THE EVIL WITHIN

WORSE THAN



ALIEN: ISOLATION

FAQs

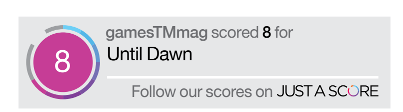
Q. CAN I RUN?
No. Holding down L1 lets you move a bit faster, but generally you'll be walking *everywhere*.

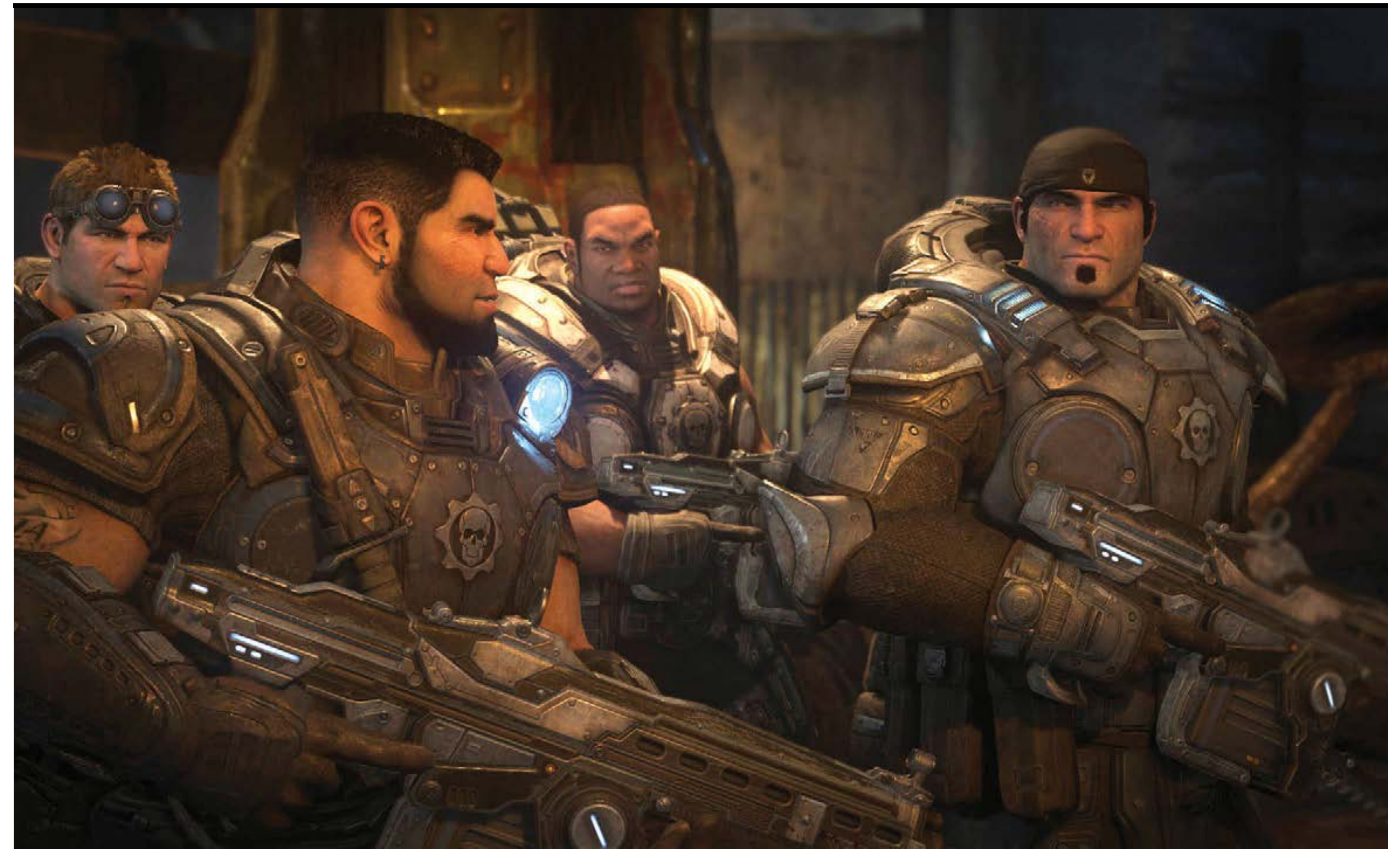
Q. IS IT SCARY?
There's gore here and there, and yes there are some jump scares, but largely, it just inflicts dread.

Q. IS IT 'WINNABLE'?
Yes. It's possible for everyone to survive it to the end. Good luck!

VERDICT

SELF-AWARE AND DECONSTRUCTIVE





THE BEST JUST GOT BETTER?

Gears Of War: Ultimate Edition

Above: The squad AI is awful and the only clear flaw with the campaign. It's more incentive to play with a human partner, which is arguably the best way to enjoy *Gears Of War*.

Chainsaw revs. Shaky cam. Mad World. Meatbags for soldiers. If *Halo*'s sci-fi leanings and ambition marked Microsoft's dramatic entrance into uncharted console waters with original Xbox, then *Gears Of War* was the perfect partner for Xbox 360 – bold and brash, both series and console shared a fetish for grit and muscle. It's strange to think back to a time when *Gears Of War* was an unknown prospect when we're all now so familiar with the impact it had, a thousand and one cover shooters all following in its wake.

What's surprising is how well *Gears Of War* holds up almost a decade on from its original release and that's mostly down to the core mechanics, which show why this third-person shooter had such an impact on the industry. Cliff Bleszinski would speak in the years after its release about making the moment-to-moment gameplay compelling, and Epic succeeded through active reloads, slamming into cover, blindfiring at enemies and so on. Every facet of the gameplay has been crafted with care, resulting in a shooter that feels as though it has been built with thought, each weapon feeling chunky and bombastic. It's a testament to the original design (and the sprucing up done by The Coalition with the visuals) that the only sign of age comes from some of the animations under scrutiny.

What also stands out is how well designed the campaign is. There's a deliberate order to how *Gears Of War* arranges its chaos – fight this single wretch, fight this bunch of wretches, now fight exploding wretches, now fight exploding wretches while dealing with the Locust. There are a lot of obstacles that you have to learn how to overcome (Thoren Guards, Berserkers, Troika Turrets and so on) along with new situations and mechanics that you're learning alongside that (using Hammer Of Dawn, surviving ambushes, etc). Epic did a fantastic job of mixing up old and new combat scenarios and that's what keeps the campaign so engaging right up until the final boss battle.

There are problems, however. While the Locust do a good impression of a squadron working together and thinking about the best way to approach, the human squad AI is dire. You'll frequently see Dom, Baird and Cole zig-zagging in front of you, ducking out of cover at awful moments, allowing Locust to run past unharmed or running straight in front of you right as you prep a Torque Bow or Longshot.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: The Coalition
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 (1-8 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

GEARS OF WAR WAS THE PERFECT PARTNER FOR XBOX 360 – BOLD AND BRASH

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE TO COMPLETE?

On Hardcore difficulty, it will take roughly 10 to 12 hours to complete the main game, less if you're playing in co-op.

Q. IS THERE MUCH REPLAY VALUE FOR CAMPAIGN?

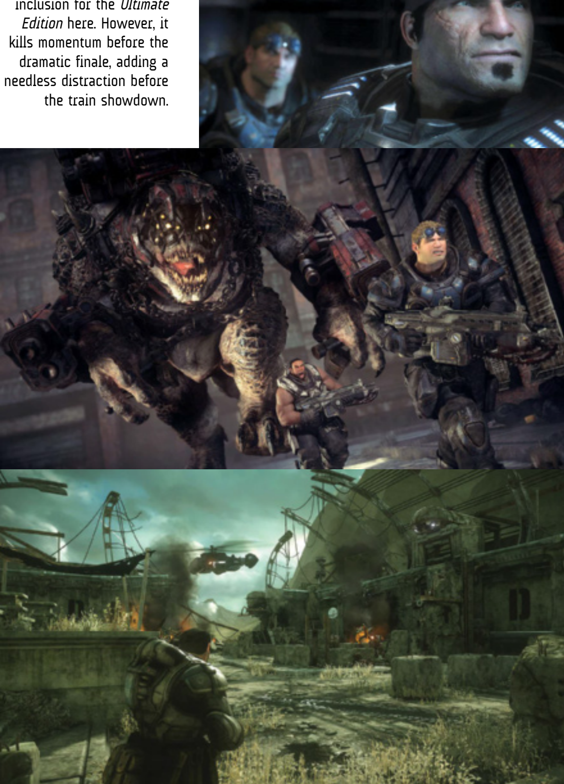
Yes. You'll want to visit the campaign on harder difficulties and co-op. Plus all the COG tags.

Q. HOW DIFFICULT IS MULTIPLAYER?

The sheer number of *Gears* veterans makes it tough to jump into, along with the unusual mechanics to master.



Left: The boss battles are mostly well designed, from the actual encounters themselves to the way that the campaign teases the showdowns before they actually happen.



Below: The Brumak chapter was added for the PC release of *Gears Of War* and was an obvious inclusion for the *Ultimate Edition* here. However, it kills momentum before the dramatic finale, adding a needless distraction before the train showdown.

Arguably, this is a campaign that should be tackled with a human player rather than AI, but it's still a flaw. The pacing also suffers towards the end – adding in the Brumak chapter between Fenix's homecoming and the game's finale was undoubtedly a necessary move given this is billed as the *Ultimate Edition* but when played as part of the campaign rather than as a DLC extra, it saps momentum out of the final few hours.

Yet while the success story of *Gears Of War* was built on its campaign, it was the multiplayer that saw Epic's shooter really take flight. The cover mechanics translated brilliantly to online, the focus on giving your team-mates covering fire, open arena-like maps and flanking opponents making *Gears* feel like a brutal game of paintball in terms of tactics, particularly compared to the popular corridors-and-corners first-person shooters of the time. That still holds true today – few games can match the last-man-standing drama you'll find in multiplayer and there's nothing out there quite like *Gears Of War*. In some ways, that even includes its own sequels, which saw the game-changing additions of further mechanics such as crawling when downed, meat shields, planting grenades, mortar strikes and so on shift the focus towards slightly more conservative play.

The simplicity here is what works, as matches are often battles of long-distance cover fire, up-close shotgun battles and positioning. *Gears Of War*'s multiplayer is fast and brutal while maps such as Canals, Gridlock and Fuel Depot are as brilliant now as they were back then, thanks to the boxy design encouraging long distance shoot-outs until someone dares to run from cover to force mistakes from the other team. Ultimately, multiplayer favours up-close shotgun battles and there's a painful learning curve if you want to compete at a high level, but the teamwork, drama and satisfaction from almost every kill offers plenty of reward along the way.

It's worth noting that it isn't *quite* the same *Gears Of War* multiplayer you'll remember. It's been tweaked slightly, in terms of mechanics (spotting has been added), technical accomplishment (it now runs at 60fps), map design (sandbags replacing blocks at chokepoints on Escalation, as an example) and even balance (active reloads on Longshot no longer instantly down players, as another example). But every change here works. They all add something to the multiplayer and The Coalition has shown that it has understood the years and years of feedback from players, for both the original *Gears* and subsequent sequels, by tinkering and tweaking in all the right areas.

There has been a rising discomfort with the number of remasters on each console's release schedule but the likes of *DmC: Definitive Edition* and *The Last Of Us Remastered* show what value these projects can bring to the current gen when done well. *Gears Of War: Ultimate Edition* definitely belongs in that upper tier; its campaign no longer carries the industry-shaping impact it once had but it remains tremendous fun, while its multiplayer is still dramatic, unique and engaging, perhaps even more so now given the final touches The Coalition has added. As was the case back in 2006, come for the campaign and stay for the multiplayer – you'll be glad you did.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

CAMPAIGN: New textures, a brighter colour palette and reshot cutscenes change the mood slightly.
MULTIPLAYER: Lots of small tweaks, plus the addition of new skins for characters and weapons.

INSANE IN THE MEMBRAIN

The old Casual, Hardcore and Insane settings have gone, now replaced by Easy, Normal, Hardcore and Insane. Insane is available right from the start rather than having to be unlocked – already an improvement on the original – and it doesn't feel quite as tough as Insane did for the original *Gears Of War*. Part of that is experience from playing through four *Gears Of War* games, part of that is already knowing and understanding obstacles and part of that is the addition of spotting, which helps a great deal in co-op (particularly for those playing together in silence).

BETTER THAN

GEARS OF WAR 2





GEARS OF WAR 3

AS GOOD AS

VERDICT

A TRUE CLASSIC THAT REMAINS BRILLIANT TODAY

8

gamesTMmag scored 8 for
Gears Of War: Ultimate Edition
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

TIME TO MAKE A BIG PLAY

Madden NFL 16

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox 360, PS3
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: EA Tiburon
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

MADDEN NFL 15





FIFA 15

WORSE THAN

***Madden 16* is an exhilarating, infuriating and nerve-wracking experience, but then so is American football when it's at it's best.** As such, it remains a great ambassador to this incredibly dense sport and one that makes enough incremental changes each year to stay relevant. This year the changes have made it a little more complex, but the additions have added greater intensity to both attacking and defending the ball. On the surface it's a small change, but in a sport this structured, any tweak can have a massive impact.

The key to this instalment has been some important adjustments to the offensive side of play, allowing for greater control in passing. That includes even more variations in how the ball can be released by the quarter back and greater player-control of the receiver, allowing you to dictate how they catch the ball. The result is a swathe of new interactions, allowing you to play safe, make subtle throws that expose gaps in defences, and make stunning last-gasp plays, grabbing the ball while leaping in the air with a single hand. It can be glorious stuff.

The downside of this is that really good receivers can begin to feel a little overpowered, and online this is something that can be taken advantage of – as can some of the logic gaps in defensive AI that don't allow players to break from their patterns when really obvious things are happening on the field. Quarter back scrambles, for instance, can be used to devastating effect if not read correctly.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

BOTH SIDES OF THE BALL: Defending got the most attention last year and the improvement was profound. Seeing similar attention applied to passing and receiving makes this a far superior experience.



Above: Although attention has been paid to the passing side of the game, *Madden* remains a very physical and satisfying experience when you attempt to keep the ball on the ground and grind your way down the field.

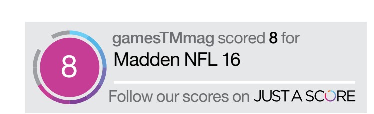


But it feels a little harsh to criticise *Madden* too much for this, since what it effectively means is that as fun as defending and running the ball have been since last year's game, now it's just as fun – if not more so – to throw it around. Defending the ball felt far more involving last year as new mechanics and controls gave us more agency of our defensive line, but now there's real tension on the line of scrimmage. Reading the play and concentrating on every down is essential.

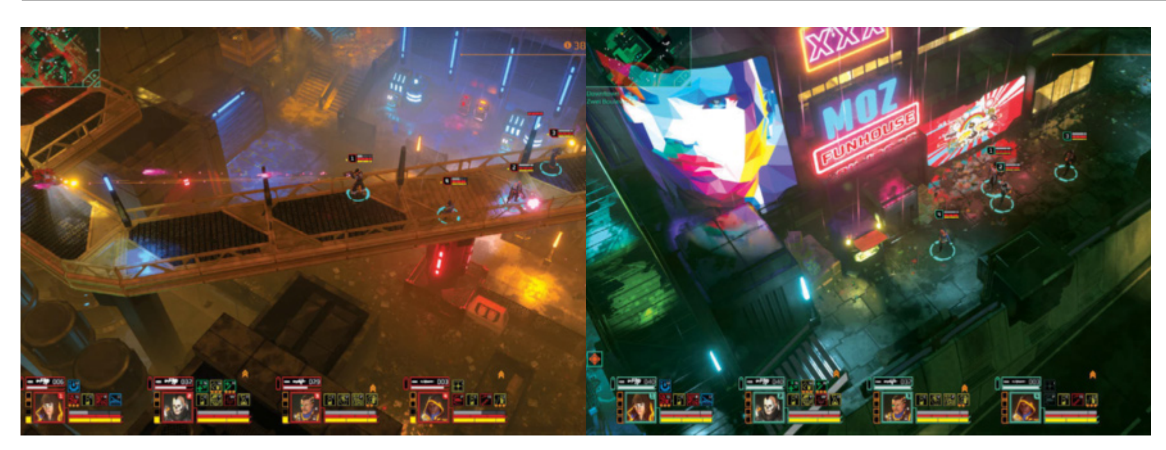
Throw in some fun new modes, such as Draft Champions, which has you pick players for a fast three-and-out contest with rewards feeding back into *Madden* Ultimate Team, and you have an improved package as well as improved play on the field. It's a nice mix of team building, draft tactics and instant gratification that shows off some of the best side of this area of the game.



MORE TACTICAL, MORE REWARDING AND MUCH MORE FUN







Left: The open-world nature of the game recreates *Syndicate*'s sensation of inconspicuously wandering through the streets as you plan your strategy. Optional objectives help provide permanent benefits for each district, too, rewarding those willing to test themselves.

A SYNDICATE STARTUP

Satellite Reign

You've got to respect the courage it takes to create a spiritual successor to one of PC gaming's most beloved names. Even more so, you've got to respect 5 Lives Studios' decision to modernise *Syndicate*'s classic gameplay, since one ever-so-slight misstep and the game could be deemed a failure. Rejoice, then, because *Satellite Reign* is far from it.

The core premise is the same, of course. You're an eye-in-the-sky commander, issuing commands to any number of four cybernetically-enhanced clones as you potter about a cyberpunk world taking on corporations. For genre fans there's plenty to drool over; this is a gorgeous world, with glowing neon lights at every corner, hovercars speeding by and the perfect blend of grot and grime. This is cyberpunk done right.

But that visual achievement can only go so far, and mercifully the gameplay backs it up. In truth it's a much slower pace than the *Syndicate* of old, and its weighty, methodical approach to movement and combat makes for a much more modern feel. Stealth is a significant addition, too, meaning a much more rewarding way of playing. The four different classes have a range of tools, from stealth infiltration, security bypassing via hacking or – the old favourite – all-out warfare. *Satellite Reign* is set in a rather expansive open world as well, making each objective – optional or otherwise – more about analysing your options beforehand, making a plan *and* a backup for when it all goes wrong. It's far richer than its inspiration, in fact, and a challenge too, ensuring you create a fool-proof plan rather than simply winging it. A perfectly executed heist offers an incredible sense of achievement. Whether you're an adoring fan of *Syndicate* or not, there's a lot to love about *Satellite Reign*.

However, not everything is quite as finely-tuned as its expressive gameplay, with AI being its number one downfall. It's one thing to have enemies rush past your gunfire only to stand in open terrain, but another to have gates failing to open or finding the opposition jammed somewhere between connected doors causing them to eternally run into whatever it is that's blocking them. It's a frustration that occurs too often, inadvertently leaving some of the toughest bases a doddle. The game never really evolves beyond its initial setup, either; newer weapons and upgraded clones increase your options, of course, but its sandbox design means only the creatively-driven will find much variety in its gameplay and missions. That *Satellite Reign* manages to overcome such complaints, though, is a testament of just how well it has modernised a classic.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Australia
PUBLISHER: 5 Lives Studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £22.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.4GHz Dual Core CPU, 3GB RAM, 1GB GPU, 2GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



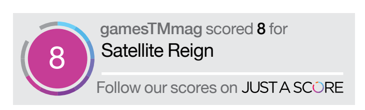
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SYNDICATED: This is an evolution of Bullfrog's classic, rather than an unofficial remake and it's all the better for it. The Commandos-style unit control makes for a wide range of tactical options.

VERDICT

AN EXCEPTIONAL MODERNISING OF A BELOVED CLASSIC





Above: The World View ability allows you to locate control boxes for barriers, and scan citizens, who must be hijacked to supply a bank of clones for your operatives to embody.

INFECTED WITH CLASS

Zombi

Shorn of some of its smartest and coolest features, this thoroughly decent port of the under-played Wii U launch title *ZombiU* continues to pack a fearsome punch, even in diminished form. A chilly and strangely melancholic adventure that merits an enthusiastic shout in any discussion about all-time great launch software, it's an inspired oddity that more than deserves to find a new audience. On that score, kudos to Ubisoft: the new price is certainly right.

And despite the fact that the original's most energising features are missed, *ZombiU*'s singular essence has been preserved. You may no longer be asked to look at a GamePad touchscreen if you want to manage your items and weaponry, but your view is still obscured and the world still doesn't pause to give you a breather. Similarly, you no longer use the GamePad's gyroscope to scan environments, but you are still rigidly pinned to the ground, which preserves much of that suspense. It's a shame that fellow players on your friends list no longer cameo as rascally members of the undead (and an expanded version of the stark-but-satisfying multiplayer component would have been very welcome) but *Zombi*'s status as a Wii U port is not brazenly apparent, which in itself is quite an achievement.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Playstation 4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montpelier / Straight Right
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Despite a 1080p resolution boost and a few updated visual assets here and there, this still isn't a pretty game, but thanks to some effectively blunt storytelling and the propulsive structure of the (guided) open world, there's very little time to care about aesthetics. And in fact, even the gameplay-based hitches – which include an eccentric waypoint marker and a few very erratic doors – only exacerbate the sense of impending panic. It's the perfect embodiment of a game that appears totally inessential until you actually get your hands on it.

So compelling are the first seven or so hours that the filthy tricks of the finale can't even sour them: as with so many console launch titles, your progress is repeatedly impeded late-on in the belief that retries constitute value for money. If the sudden prevalence of surprise attacks from insta-kill exploders is tough to stomach, the fact that the map is locked down at one point (forcing you to work without the shortcuts you've spent the entire game accumulating) feels like an unforgivably desperate parting snub. And yet, perched on the very edge of your seat, you resign yourself yet again to the task of keeping one more feckless Londoner alive without even thinking twice.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TORCH IT: Your flashlight now allows you to trigger a more powerful beam at the expense of battery life, but it also takes far longer to recharge. Be careful.

BETTER THAN

ZOMBIE ARMY TRILOGY



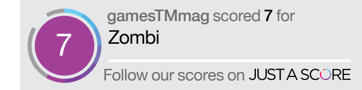
WORSE THAN

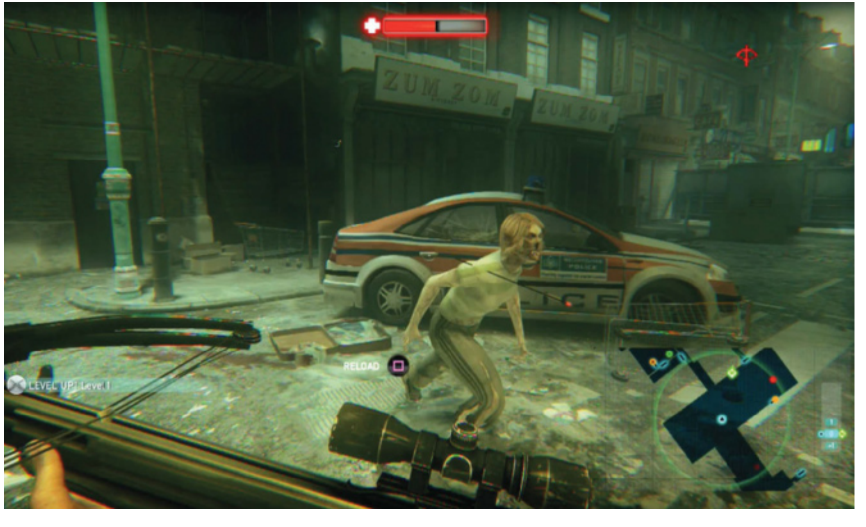


ZOMBIU

VERDICT

SURPRISINGLY FRESH FOR A CARCASS







Above: When you perish, your undead corpse then lumbers around, waiting for your next character to batter them and retrieve their kit. However, if you die en route to your previous self, the opportunity to get your stuff back is lost instantly, like *Dark Souls*. Brutal.

A PHILOSOPHICAL HORROR GAME THAT OFFERS MORE THAN MINDLESS SCARES

SOMA

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Frictional Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £22.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC:
OS: Windows 7 64-bit
CPU: 2.0 GHz Intel Core i3 or AMD A6
RM: 4GB
Video: Nvidia GeForce GTX 460M series or AMD Radeon HD 5770 (1GB RAM)
HDD: 25GB
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

THE EVIL WITHIN





ALIEN: ISOLATION

WORSE THAN

If you come to *SOMA* with a sadistic urge to spend a few hours having your heart rattled against your ribcage, you'll leave disappointed. *SOMA*'s story – not the pants-filling horror we expected from Frictional Games – takes centre stage. You're Simon Jarrett, arriving confused and scared at a research facility deep in the Atlantic Ocean. With little choice, you plunge into the darkness.

Pathos-II is a joy to explore: an homage to classic sci-fi films complete with whirring machinery, flickering lights, and a cast of robots. As you move from room to room – through cramped living quarters crammed with personal affects to glass walkways revealing the living ocean around you – the story of the base's terrifying past slowly reveals itself. It's filled with scribbled notes between now-dead colleagues and haunting audio recordings, each offering new information.

It unfolds at a slow pace, but you're never in one place long enough to feel bored, as the game whisks you between sections of the base via abandoned rescue boats, shuttles, and the ocean's open floor. *SOMA*'s theme makes it all the more intriguing. Without giving too much away, it asks the question: what does it mean to be human? If that sounds too lofty, don't worry. It's made believable by the setting, and by the occasional robot characters that fill it. Aside from the flat protagonist, it's well acted, and superb sound effects make the world come alive.

But remember: this is a horror game. Your time spent poking around living quarters, solving satisfying computer and physics-based puzzles are interrupted by drawn-out horror sequences that lend a sense of foreboding to the entire game. It's the right kind of horror: slow-burning, short on jump-scares but filled with anxious glances over the shoulder. Every time your screen flickers with static – a sign a monster is near – you'll want to cower in a corner, turn the sound down, and cry until it all just goes away.

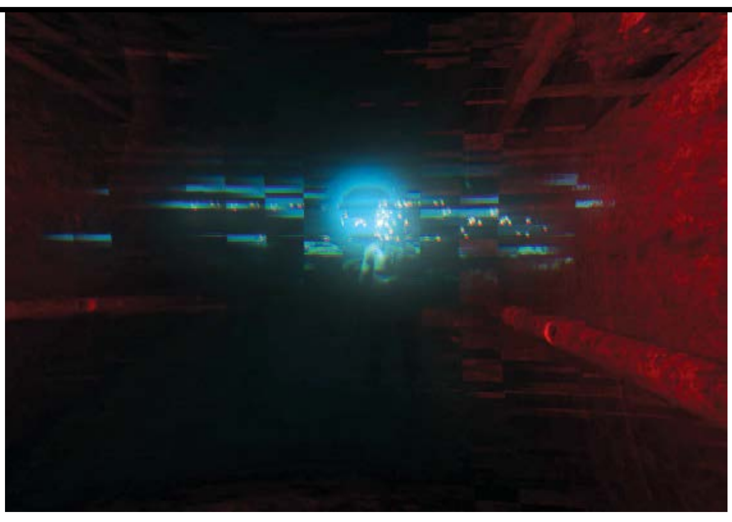
But after a while these segments frustrate. Your enemies are easily fooled, and will leave you alone if you look at a wall long enough. They're repetitive, too: they vary in appearance, but at their core these sections are just variations on a theme. Worst of all – and this is a sign of just how good the story is – you feel like you're missing out on the wider game. You go from learning something new in every room to thirty minutes scrabbling around in the dark.

Every time you see that static, your heart sinks. Not just because you know you're about to reveal how much of a coward you are, but because you resent the fact you're being taken away from *SOMA*'s wonderful world. The result is an unhappy marriage of horror and narrative exploration, but – by the end of the satisfying story – you'll be glad you stuck it out.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ROBOTS THAT THINK THEY'RE HUMAN: *SOMA* deals with the nature of our existence and some of its robot inhabitants – crushed metal limbs and all – are convinced they're human.



Above: The monsters slowly stalk you as static flickers on your screen. Your first glimpse is genuinely terrifying.



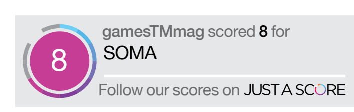
Well, it was talking – that's rarely a good sign.



Above: It's not a game to play at night with the lights off.

VERDICT

A SUPERB STORY WITH MISMATCHED HORROR ELEMENTS



THE SAME TALE - TOLD SIX TIMES

Celestian Tales: Old North

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Indonesia
PUBLISHER: Digital Tribe Games
DEVELOPER: Ekuator Games
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7/8, Intel Core i3 2.1GHz processor or AMD equivalent, 2GB RAM, Intel HD 4000 graphics card, DirectX 9.0c compatible sound card
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
THE BOOK OF UNWRITTEN TALES 2



WORSE THAN
GAME OF THRONES, EPISODE 4

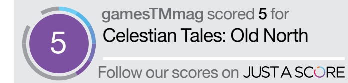
You might be prepared to indulge *Celestian Tales* for its nostalgia value and lovely hand-drawn art, and that's not a bad thing. The visuals are some of its best assets: impactful character imagery that captures heroes' and villains' souls, as text dialogue fills up the coloured boxes below them.

Celestian Tales shares its story between six heroes, all with their ulterior motives and desires. Each character gets a tailored prologue sequence, after which they team up for a campaign centred on their quest to become knights. However, there is nothing on show here that players won't have experienced before. Combat is a hollow, bland experience lacking any elaborate tactical decisions. There are RPGs that came out decades ago and used sprites against 2D backdrops in a similar tactical turn-based layout, yet are still more interesting than what you'll find in *Celestian Tales*.

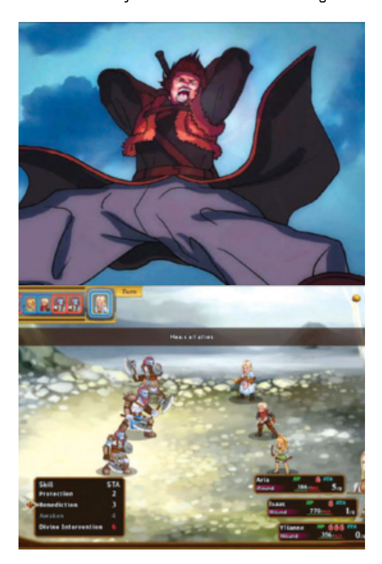
The most appealing aspect of *Celestian Tales* is your party of heroes. The banter, personality conflict and character growth manage to hold attention, though it's easy to picture a checklist of fantasy tropes being ticked off as you get to know everyone in your little group. Only one playable hero, Isaac, has an origin story that you might find surprising, however, as the rest are instantly forgettable.

Celestian Tales promises more than it can deliver. It wraps several plot threads into a single scenario we've played before in some form or another and don't need to play again - let alone six times for the sake of discovering every hero's story.

VERDICT
VISUALLY APPEALING, BUT SHALLOW



Below: What the game title doesn't make clear is that this is only part one of a trilogy. Future games will follow our heroes as they contend with different challenges.



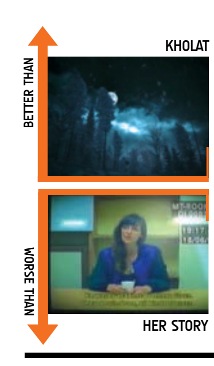
STEP INTO FRAGILE WORLDS

Dream

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Mastertronic
DEVELOPER: HyperSloth
PRICE: £12.99
RELEASE: Out Now
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP (SP3), Windows Vista (SP2), Windows 7, Windows 8, 3.0 GHz Dual Core Processor, 4GB RAM, Shader Model 3 compliant graphics cards, DirectX 9.0c, 5GB available space
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
KHOLAT



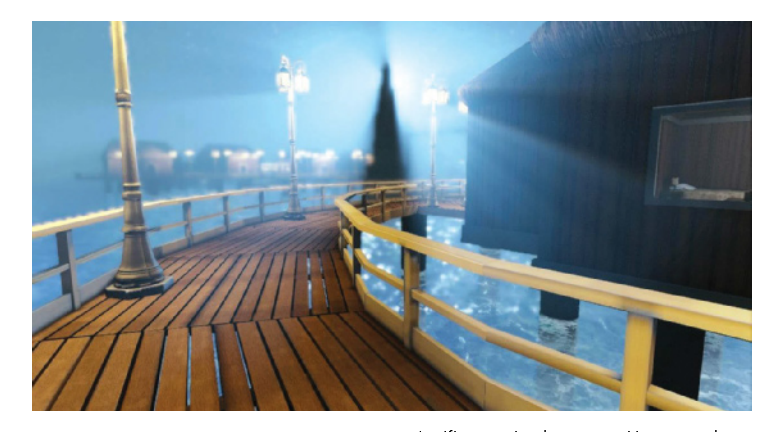
WORSE THAN
HER STORY

***Dream* is a complex beast.** It comes across as a exploration game, but also flirts with puzzles, interactive narrative and even horror elements. The worlds it takes us to range from bizarre and beautiful to downright sinister or weird – and perhaps that's why it feels so inconsistent.

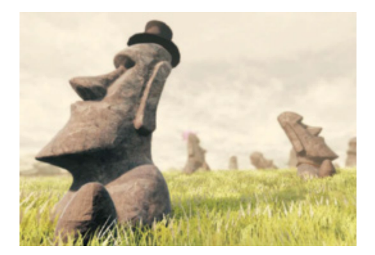
Players enter the mind of unemployed graduate Howard Phillips, who has a lot of negative emotions to contend with. His bed serves as a portal to a dreaming hub world from which he can access three distinct dreamscapes, each with puzzles to solve, and thoughts to collect. The more players find, the clearer the story behind Howard's emotions become, but it's a difficult process of investment thanks largely to a divided mix of puzzles that have little or no connection to Howard's struggles.

Two stand-out moments in *Dream* come in the form of a light beam puzzle and an Easter Egg hunt, the latter having some significance in the story. However there are some challenges that are just painful to deal with – and not in the way where you feel like a genius after figuring them out.

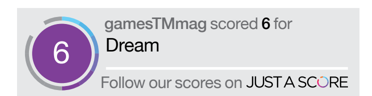
Dream is ambitious, but players will need to be persistent and forgiving to enjoy what it has to offer them.



Above: Some of the dream worlds can look gorgeous, but harsh lighting and lack of focus make it hard for us to appreciate them. This is troubling, especially when we remember that *Dream* was built to work with the Oculus Rift.



VERDICT
SOMETIMES INTRIGUING, BUT ULTIMATELY AVERAGE

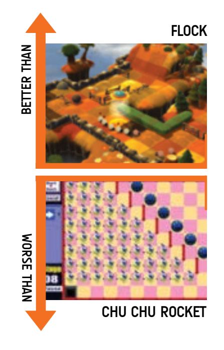


OUR BRAINS ARE FELINE MIGHTY TIRED

The Cat Machine

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Cranktrain
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Win XP, 1.66GHz dual-core, 2GB RAM
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



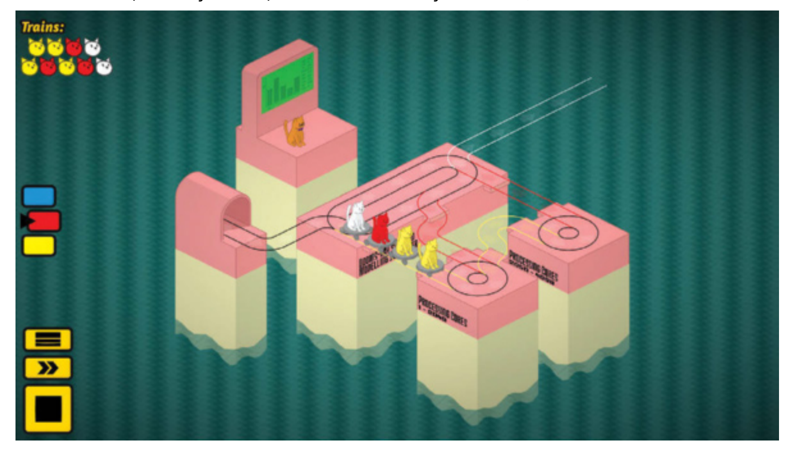
Sometimes the simplest games are the most satisfying to play: this is clearly a rule *The Cat Machine* hopes to live by, offering a solitary gameplay mechanic for its 50 or so stages. According to its intro sequence, the Earth's orbit around the Sun is not powered by gravity, but in fact by cats being flung into space. The player is in charge of repairing the flinging machine and ensuring the kitty-launching process continues.

Each stage consists of a number of conveyor belts, and the player can place more belts at certain points. 'Trains' made of cats slide along these rails, with the front cat able to travel along rails of the same colour before zooming off into the air. The aim is to arrange the conveyors in a way that each cat-train can be sent into space in its entirety.

Given that this single concept makes up the game it's unsurprising that you're expected to master it fairly quickly. Before too long levels start getting complex, with some real head-scratchers turning up long before you get to halfway. This is all supported by funny dialogue in each stage, with countless daft cat-related jokes.

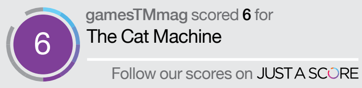
Ultimately though, with the player expected to face similar problems in every stage, repetition sets in and each level begins to feel like an exercise in resolve. Soon the real test becomes not whether you can figure it out, but whether your interest will wane before you do. It will certainly give your grey matter a workout, but it's clear that this would be better suited to mobile.

Below: As this 'train' gets to the end of the yellow track, the front yellow cat will fly off. The train will then continue until the next cat (the other yellow one) reaches the next similarly-coloured rail, and so on.



VERDICT

CHARMING AND TRICKY BUT FAR TOO REPETITIVE



A DARK GAME WITH BRIGHT IDEAS

In Between

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Headup Games
DEVELOPER: Gentlymad
PRICE: £8.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Win 7, 2GHz Intel Core 2 Duo, 2GB RAM
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



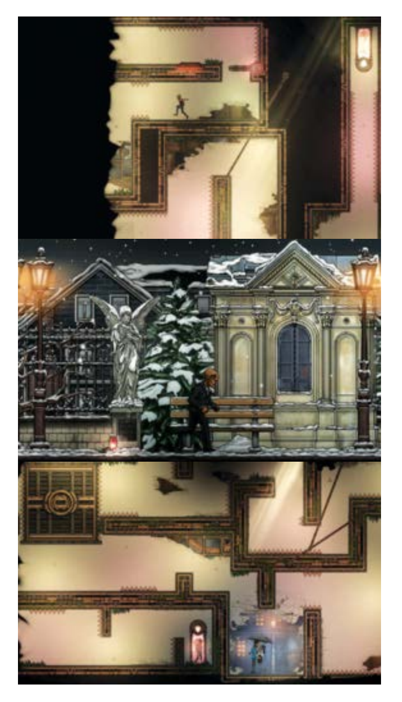
***In Between* is the latest in the current trend of narrative 2D platform games that use its stages as a backdrop for a much deeper story than the likes of *Mario* and *Earthworm Jim* ever encountered.** In this case the story's protagonist is diagnosed with cancer and so the player takes a journey through his head, visiting his memories and feelings.

The game's core mechanic is the ability to flip gravity in four different directions. Your character can't jump, he can only walk left and right along the plane he's on, so a combination of positioning and gravity manipulation is required in order to steer him through the 60 levels.

Cleverly, each of the worlds introduces a new mechanic that corresponds with the stages of dealing with the diagnosis of a terminal illness. Denial comes in the form of an ever-approaching wall of black fog that will kill you if it surrounds you but will back away if you turn around and face it. Meanwhile, Anger materialises as large glowing orange balls that slowly skulk around the level, causing you to explode if you touch them.

The game's narrative elements are beautifully revealed, tearing away parts of the background wall as you approach them and showing past memories while the narrator (who is perhaps a little too over-dramatic at times) explains their significance. The playable cut-scenes are also a joy to wander through, as scenes transition in ingenious ways and your heart grows ever fonder for this man.

Given its subject matter, its unique art style and its flowery, over-acted prose, *In Between* could so easily have tumbled into pretentiousness. It's a credit to developer Gentlymad that it never does this: instead it delivers a touching story and wraps it around a compelling puzzle platformer.



Above: Memories uncover themselves by peeling off sections of wall as you approach them. Here our protagonist reminisces about his one true love and how everything felt right when she was around.

VERDICT

A BEAUTIFUL PUZZLER THAT WILL STAY WITH YOU

8
gamesTMmag scored 8 for
In Between
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

PHYSICS PUZZLER WITH A DARK HEART

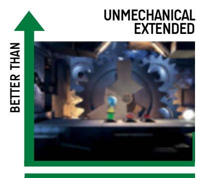
The Bridge

DETAILS

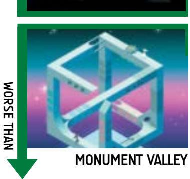
FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC, PS3, Xbox 360, Wii U
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: The Quantum Astrophysicists Guild
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

UNMECHANICAL EXTENDED



WORSE THAN



MONUMENT VALLEY

It's rare that we get to call a puzzle game menacing, but that's exactly the feeling we get playing *The Bridge*. This is a dark, twisted experience that's attempting to do for MC Escher what *Braid* did for time manipulation, except even darker and moodier. For the most part it's a success in this regard, it just lacks a little heart or a truly compelling message at its centre to compensate for its brevity.

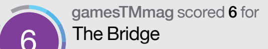
As you explore stage after stage of bendy mazes, avoiding giant stone balls that kill you instantly and grabbing keys to exit each stage, the eerie music lets you know that things are not as they seem. The initial run-through offers a mild to moderate challenge as the complexity of the physics puzzles and number of hoops you need to jump through increase, although it's really the mirrored second stage of the game that kicks things up a gear. Replaying each stage feels like a chore, but added challenge takes things up a notch.

While the puzzles offer some enjoyment and challenge, the trappings of *The Bridge* lack the insight that they appear to be reaching for. It seems to want to be profound and mind-opening as well as mind-twisting, but it never really reaches those heights. The story snippets and floating text don't add much, feeling a little forced and breaking the atmosphere that the game was otherwise doing rather well in creating.

The Bridge certainly has some value as a physics puzzler and while comparisons to the likes of *Braid* are difficult to avoid, the music and black-and-white sketch style offer a refreshing change of pace to much of what's out there.

VERDICT

INTERESTING AND CHALLENGING, BUT LACKING DEPTH



6 gamesTMmag scored 6 for The Bridge

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



Above: Once elements such as vortexes, inverted gravity and more begin to interplay in puzzles, *The Bridge* becomes a much more engaging experience.

JUST NOT QUITE DEEP ENOUGH

Submerged

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: Australia
PUBLISHER: Uppercut Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

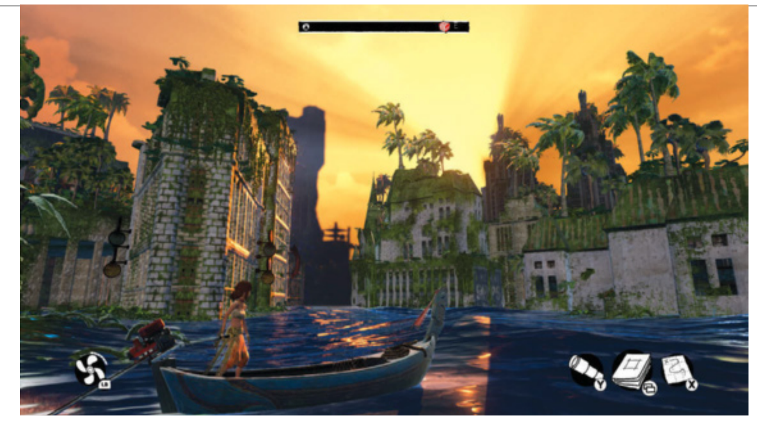
I AM ALIVE



WORSE THAN



BROTHERS: A TALE OF TWO SONS



What *Submerged* lacks above all other things is a deftness of touch. It brings to mind some great digital experiences like *Brothers* and *Journey*, but it doesn't really come close to their subtle brilliance. There are none of the peaks of pure joy at discovery or some epic moment that lifts you up, nor any great troughs other than a general sense of mundanity that pervades the game.

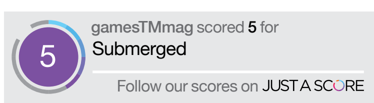
There's just an overall lack of subtlety, from the controls, to the music, to the story-telling. We should start with the controls though, which lack weight or any sense of a physics engine dictating the flow of the game. For an experience set largely on water, in a boat, the sense of attempting to navigate such an environment is disappointingly weightless. It's floaty, and not in a good way. Then, on foot, the progress is slow, with very little sense that the character is set within the world. The climbing is also rather uninspired, as if simply leaping from one outcrop to another by holding a direction was thought to be enough fun. It's the traversal equivalent of painting by numbers; it looks fine, but you're not really that integral to the experience.

Narratively, it has moments where the older sister and injured younger brother narrative touches on the heartbreaking, but it's told in a rather clumsy illustrative style and in-game language without dialogue. While that can work, there's nothing too surprising to be found and the animation lacks that all-important subtlety to sell the experience. It's not helped by a soundtrack that can be a little heavy-handed at times. Leaning on a piano score keeps things simple, but it could have done with something a little more engaging.

Submerged has a reasonable story to tell; it even has a pretty interesting world lore behind it all, but none of it binds together to become more than the sum of its parts. It's an easy set of Achievements to grab, but there's not much more to it than that.

VERDICT

PLEASANT, BUT LACKING IN POLISH AND SUBTLETY



5 gamesTMmag scored 5 for Submerged

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



"You're really trying to balance and create a colony and you're trying to trade with the old world"

FEARGUS URQUHART – CEO, OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT



WHY I ♥...

SID MEIER'S COLONIZATION

FEARGUS URQUHART – CEO, OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT

It's often a toss up and they're similar, but I'll go with possibly the less known [game]... And it's super old. It's Colonization *by Sid Meier and it is a game that I probably return to about once a year, maybe once every two years. I've never beaten it. It's a very interesting take on* Civ *– it was built on the* Civilization *engine, it came out in about '94 I think. They eventually did a Windows version of it, so there's sort of a newer version that you can find.*

When you're playing Civilization *it has this cadence; you just keep building and building and building. And eventually you either go and kill people or you take them over with political power and stuff like that. But* Colonization *was so interesting in that you had the goal of you needed to revolt against England, and so you had this specific thing you were trying to do and if you didn't do it right, and I never can do it right, they just land a bunch of troops and kill you.*

But in all of that you're really trying to balance and create a colony and you're trying to trade with the old world. I think Sid did an amazing job and it's an under-appreciated game. Obviously the graphics are pretty old, but they redid it using the Civilization 4 *engine (I think), so you can get it as an add-on to* Civ 4 *and it's pretty good, but I would say that the original one is still a little bit better.*

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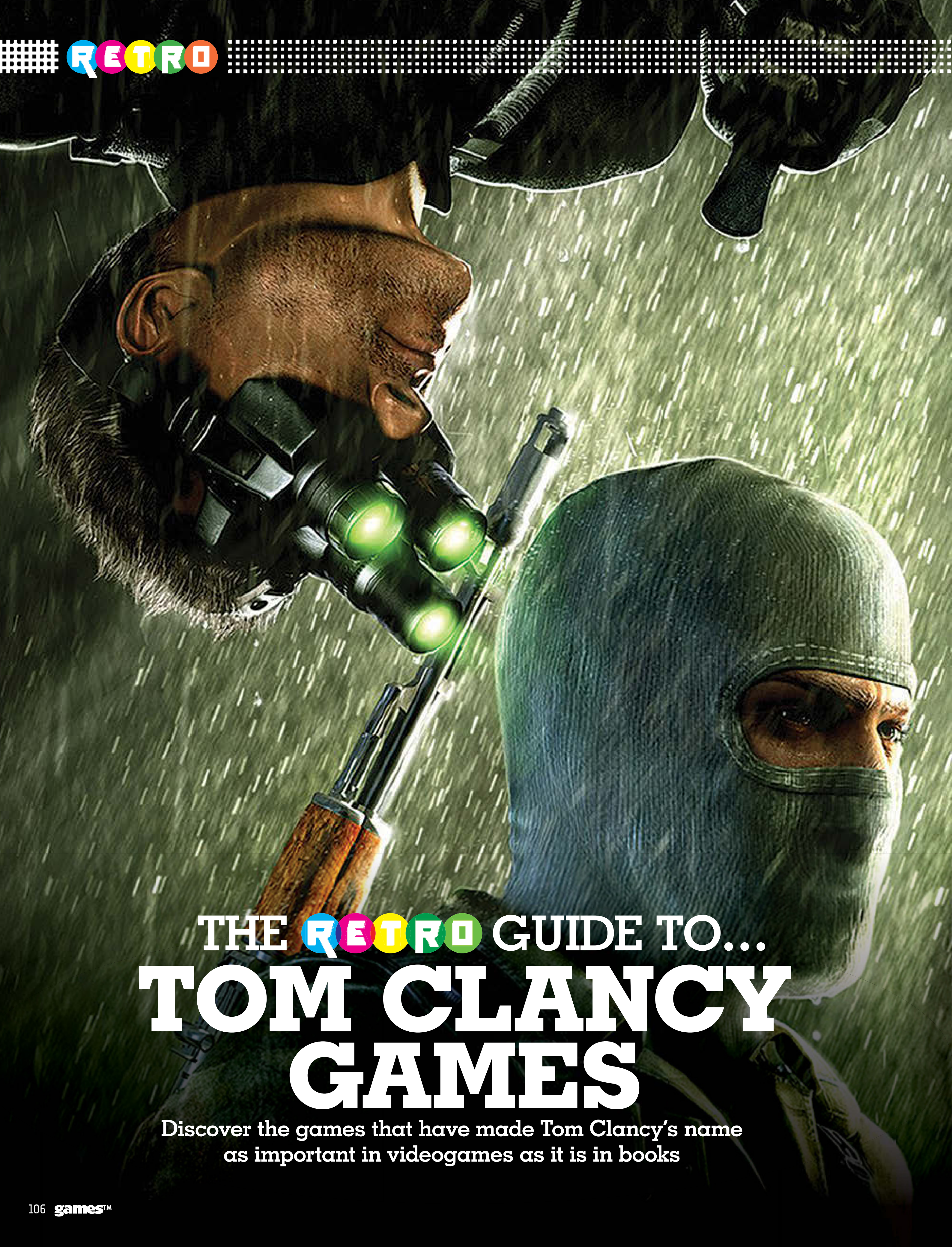
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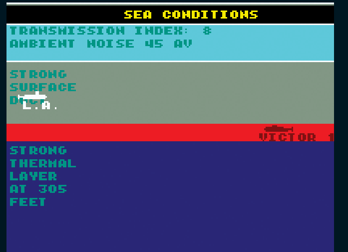
THE RETRO GUIDE TO... TOM CLANCY GAMES

Discover the games that have made Tom Clancy's name as important in videogames as it is in books

TOM CLANCY WAS one of the world's most respected authors, excelling in military and espionage novels until his death in 2013. His first novel, *The Hunt For Red October* was released in 1984, and a videogame adaptation wasn't too far behind, arriving in 1987. More variations of *The Hunt For Red October* appeared throughout the late Eighties and early Nineties, all of them using the popular Sean Connery movie as a template and all of middling quality.

The fortunes of games linked to Clancy's name changed when he co-founded Red Storm Entertainment in 1996 with Doug Littlejohns, a British Royal Navy submarine captain. Designed to capture the spirit of Clancy's novels, early games, while experimental, typically played it safe, so *Politika* was a twist on the popular board game Risk, while Tom Clancy's *ruthless.com* was a turn-based effort and an adaptation of his novel of the same name.

The Tom Clancy name really came of age in videogame terms with the release of *Rainbow Six* in 1996, which has turned into a huge brand for Ubisoft, the new owners of Red Storm Entertainment. *Ghost Recon*, *Splinter Cell*, *EndWar* and *H.A.W.X.* have all followed, suggesting that Clancy's ambitious vision for gaming simply needed to wait long enough for technology to catch up with it.





THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER 1987

SYSTEM: COMMODORE 64, AMIGA

The very first game to be based on a Tom Clancy novel ended up having several iterations, a theme that would continue with many later games.

Split into two distinct parts, the first half of the game concentrates on you trying to escape in your Russian sub, while the second deals with your rendezvous with the Americans. Mines and other Russian submarines are just a few of the hazards you need to negotiate in your escape, and your success here determines how difficult your rendezvous with the Americans is.

It's a slow-burning game to be sure and difficult to get to grips with (it comes with an impressively dense 40-page instruction manual) but it does prove to be surprisingly engaging once you suss the controls.







RAINBOW SIX 1998

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

The first *Rainbow Six* game helped redefine the tactical shooter and proved that it was still possible to create a thinking person's alternative to *Doom*. The PC version is excellent, allowing you to control squads, plan routes as you pull off the elaborate missions. It's not the most accessible of games, but does reward those that plan. The console versions on the other hand are far poorer, particularly the PlayStation port, and feature greatly cut down visuals and far clunkier controls. Play them at your peril.

RED STORM RISING 1988

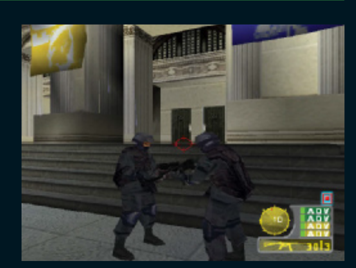
SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Due to the popularity of *The Hunt For Red October*, many *Tom Clancy* games were submarine-based. *Red Storm Rising* is one such example, and while it can get bogged down in stats and statistics, there's a lot of impressive content. It's possible to choose from four distinct time periods (with differing technology available for each) and there are a staggering array of scenarios. Everything from convoy missions and one-on-one skirmishes are available, with experts having the option to participate in World War III. Like the novel, *Red Storm Rising* concentrates on the Norwegian Sea Theatre and is relatively authentic. It's not really a game that you can simply jump into, but perseverance reaps its own rewards. The 16-bit outings are the ones to go for.

RAINBOW SIX ROGUE SPEAR 1999

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Rainbow Six's sequel builds on its predecessor and refines everything that made the original so enjoyable. The PC version features enhanced graphics, larger playing areas and superior animation. It also lets you peek around corners, utilise snipers and adds the useful Eagle Watch mode from the expansion of the same name. While there are more operatives and weapons than before, the emphasis on stealth means that many of the new guns will see limited use. The console versions are once again watered down.





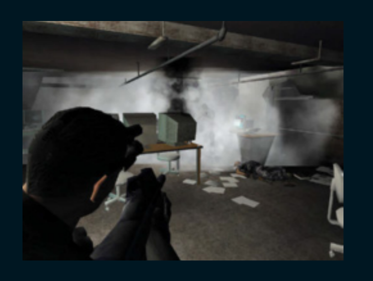


GHOST RECON 2001

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Unlike *Rainbow Six*, the *Ghost Recon* series isn't tied to any of Clancy's books. It works to the game's benefit however, allowing Red Storm Entertainment far more freedom as you lead your group of Ghosts through some extremely challenging missions.

While it takes the same squad-based approach of *Rainbow Six*, gameplay feels more methodical and tactical, with you carefully having to balance your squads in order to best complete missions. While the original PC version featured three squadrons, the console versions only managed two. Four different team members are available: rifleman, demolitions, sniper and support, while there's a bigger focus on wilderness environments compared to city-based settings of *Rainbow Six*. It gained a firm following on Xbox due to its excellent online mode.





SPLINTER CELL 2002

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

This highly polished stealth game started life as an Xbox exclusive and was dubbed as a western alternative to *Metal Gear Solid*. It soon became obvious that it was a very different game, thanks to an excellent performance from Michael Ironside as the grizzled Sam Fisher and a much higher emphasis on pure stealth. Despite Fisher's age in the game, he remains a highly agile agent being able to shimmy and hang from pipes, pull off split jumps and other acrobatic stunts. He prefers to work in the darkness, with the player being advised to always use shadows to get the drop on opponents and choose fleeing over fighting. Combat still happens, of course, and an array of weapons makes Fisher a more than capable agent in the field, but the highest satisfaction of *Splinter Cell* comes when you complete a stage without anyone knowing you were there. The GBA version is a more conventional, but enjoyable 2D stealth action game.

RAINBOW SIX: RAVEN SHIELD 2003

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

The third *Rainbow Six* game is a different beast depending on which version you play. Those wanting a more tactical game should opt for the PC outing as it features mission planning and the ability to control multiple characters, which greatly adds to its strategy. The console versions, simply called *Rainbow Six 3*, not only feature completely different plots, but are also far easier, with the Xbox version featuring additional headset support. The emphasis on online play makes Microsoft's version the one to plump for.



"THE CONSOLE VERSIONS NOT ONLY FEATURE DIFFERENT PLOTS BUT ARE ALSO FAR EASIER"

GHOST RECON 2 2004

SYSTEM: XBOX, PLAYSTATION 2, GAMECUBE

Although the original *Ghost Recon* started off life on PC, the sequel was found only on consoles, with slight variations between all three versions. Unlike its predecessor, *Ghost Recon 2* takes a more ballsy approach to its gameplay, ignoring the strategic gameplay of old in favour of a more arcade-like Call Of Duty affair. The results divided the franchise's fan base, with as many celebrating the new direction as those lamenting its new simplistic approach. In addition to a new over-the-shoulder viewpoint (the original remains for those wishing to use it) *Ghost Recon 2* adds a new radar, dumps the demolitions class and introduces the grenadier and lone wolf classes. Skill points and choosing your team are absent, and you now only control a single team, playing as Captain Scott Miller in the bombastic single player campaign. It's no longer possible to switch between soldiers, with the death of Miller resulting in the campaign failing.





SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY 2005

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Many feel that the third game in the *Splinter Cell* series remains the best and it's hard to argue when you consider the sheer effort Ubisoft Montreal threw into it. It's easy to laugh at the realisation that a key new mechanic to the series is Fisher's new knife, but it's surprising how effective the new weapon actually is.

Splinter Cell has predominantly been a game that rewards those who use brains over brawn, and the knife is the perfect weapon for sneaking close to more alert enemies. Close-quarters combat in general is massively improved in *Chaos Theory* and Sam can now attack foes from all directions, pull people over railings or grapple (and kill them) whilst hanging from poles. Other improvements include enemies having to actually find the bodies you incapacitate before they can sound an alarm, the ability to choose between three different equipment kits and the introduction of ragdoll physics.

Chaos Theory also greatly improves on the multiplayer modes introduced in *Pandora Tomorrow*, adding a seven-mission story mode for two players and improvements to the Spy Vs Mercenary mode. The planned GBA port was cancelled.





RAINBOW SIX LOCKDOWN 2005

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

The fourth iteration of *Rainbow Six* continued with changing the gameplay to suit both console and PC gamers. As with previous games, the console outings are far more arcade-like, particularly with the addition of new sniper missions that places you in the role of sniper, Dieter Weber, who must take out terrorists whilst covering the computer AI. They're a solid addition to the series and require good reflexes and a steady aim. Cutscenes are also included in the console versions, although the ropey scripting and poor voice acting adds little to the atmosphere. It favours action over strategy, unlike earlier games, and caused such a backlash with fans that many changes were made to the PC version. In addition to dispensing with the sniper mode, the PC outing also redesigns the levels, so that they feel more structured. Annoyingly, it removes the excellent planning phase.





GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER 2006

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Ghost Recon continued to move away from the strategy that made the first game so popular, instead embracing a more fast-paced style. Also known as *GRAW*, there are actually three versions of the game, across four different systems. The PS2 and Xbox offerings are the most basic and take the form of a first-person shooter. You only have access to one AI-controlled teammate, it completely dispenses with the useful tactical map and Captain Scott Mitchell has been rendered mute. The Xbox 360 version is a vast improvement, adding an excellent cover system, three AI-controlled teammates (who can be controlled, but not with the depth of earlier games) as well as a useful Cross Com system. It boasts improved graphics, interesting missions and challenging gameplay. It also allows players to switch between first and third-person. The PC version reverts back to first-person, allows commands to be given to individual members, (the Xbox 360 commands the group as a whole) and features far larger levels.

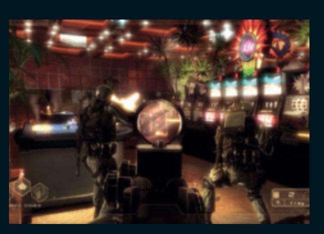
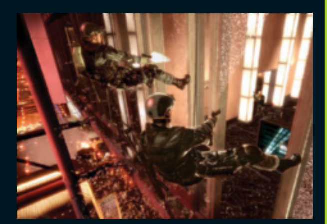
SPLINTER CELL: DOUBLE AGENT 2006

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

There are two versions of *Double Agent*. Ubisoft Montreal handled the PS2, Xbox, GameCube and Wii versions, while Ubisoft Shanghai dealt with the superior Xbox 360, PS3 and PC outings. The game itself is the most interesting *Splinter Cell* yet, due to Fisher finding himself working for two agencies, the JBA and NSA. As a result *Double Agent* features non-linear objectives and multiple endings. It also affects Fisher's weapons, as both agencies have access to unique arsenals. The solid story mode is complemented by excellent multiplayer options, unless of course you happen to own a Gamecube or Wii.

MORE TO LOOK OUT FOR

- THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER (1990) VARIOUS
- SSN (1996) PC
- RUTHLESS.COM (1998) PC
- THE SUM OF ALL FEARS (2002) VARIOUS
- SPLINTER CELL: PANDORA TOMORROW (2004) VARIOUS
- RAINBOW SIX: CRITICAL HOUR (2005) XBOX
- GHOST RECON: PREDATOR (2010) PSP
- RAINBOW SIX: SHADOW VANGUARD (2011) IOS, ANDROID
- RAINBOW SIX: SIEGE (2015) VARIOUS
- TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON: WILDLANDS (2016) VARIOUS
- THE DIVISION (2016) VARIOUS

RAINBOW SIX VEGAS 2006

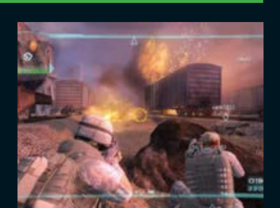
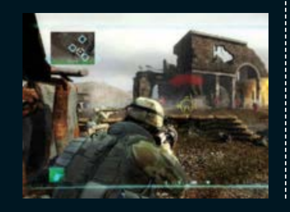
SYSTEM: VARIOUS

The first *Rainbow Six* for next-gen consoles introduced plenty of new gameplay mechanics. The most notable was a *Halo*-style regenerating health system, but another nice touch was the ability to now shout out commands to the rest of your squad via your console's headset. A checkpoint system replaced the mission planning of past games, while cutscenes were greatly reduced. It was now possible to shoot while rappelling up and down buildings and the ability to utilise a third-person viewpoint when blind-firing or suppressing fire added a new level of tactics to proceedings. A PSP version was also released but was greatly cut down. A sequel followed in 2008 and like *Vegas*, was met to critical acclaim.

ADVANCED WARFIGHTER 2 2007

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

There are two versions of *Advanced Warfighter*'s sequel. The console parts are gung-ho, *Call Of Duty*-styled affairs albeit with vastly improved AI for your squad that makes them handle far more realistically than before. The PC version, developed by Grin, plays more like the earlier *Ghost Recon* games, with a first-person perspective and a greater emphasis on tactics. Both versions now let you healed downed teammates in multiplayer.



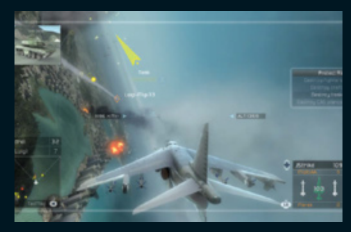
ENDWAR 2008

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

EndWar was a return to the earlier strategy games that Red Storm Entertainment had originally found success with. While *EndWar* can be controlled with a mouse or joypad, it's also possible to assign controls to your troops via a headset, which actually works well.

Set before and during a fictional World War III, it's possible to take control of three different factions, all of which play completely differently to each other, ensuring plenty of longevity. Another interesting touch that separates it from typical RTS games is that the viewpoint is primarily from ground troops, ensuring it at least looks similar to the likes of *Ghost Recon* and *Rainbow Six*.

EndWar was also released for the PlayStation Portable and Nintendo DS, but it's a vastly different game, utilising turn-based gameplay instead. Neither version was as well received, possibly because far superior examples exist on both systems.



H.A.W.X. 2009

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

In case you're wondering, the acronym stands for High Altitude Warfare (the X stands for prototype). The gameplay is nowhere near as convoluted, being Ubisoft's take on Namco's *Ace Combat* series, so there's an emphasis on silly storylines and excessive shooting. We actually applaud this combination because it's about time that the *Tom Clancy* series had a bit of fun in it. Still, being a *Tom Clancy* game, *H.A.W.X.* is still a stickler for detail, due to its impressive real-world locations which were created using commercial satellite data. While the main campaign is solid enough, *H.A.W.X.* excels thanks to its slick co-op mode and entertaining multiplayer mode.



EXPANSIONS

Extending the experience



RAINBOW SIX: EAGLE WATCH

YEAR: 1999

The first *Rainbow Six* expansion introduced four new operatives, five new campaigns, three weapons and two handy training missions. It was developed by Red Storm Entertainment.



RAINBOW SIX: ROGUE SPEAR URBAN OPERATIONS

YEAR: 2000

Rogue Spear's first expansion was a good one, as it added eight new maps, as well as five classic maps from the original *Rainbow Six* game.



RAINBOW SIX: BLACK THORN

YEAR: 2001

This standalone add-on lost its tenth map due to the 11 September attacks. It also featured ten new weapons, six multiplayer maps and a new "Lone Wolf" mode.



RAINBOW SIX: LONE WOLF

YEAR: 2002

A sadly rather disappointing addition to the series that was exclusive to PlayStation. It introduces five new missions and an insane difficulty setting.



GHOST RECON: DESERT SIEGE

YEAR: 2003

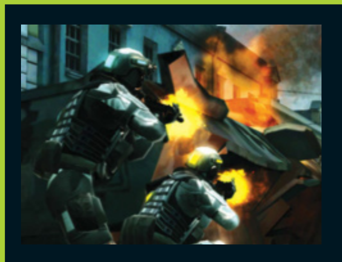
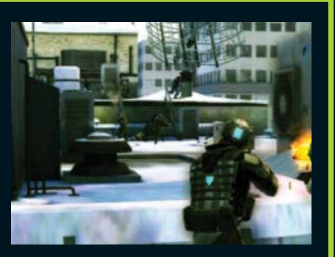
While created for PCs and Macs, this solid expansion also appeared in the PS2 version of *Ghost Recon*. The eight missions are based around securing the Eritrean border.



GHOST RECON ISLAND THUNDER

YEAR: 2003

This was the first *Ghost Recon* game available as a standalone expansion on Xbox. It uses a combat point system that upgrades characters and their weapons.

GHOST RECON 2010

SYSTEM: WII

The Wii has a string of fantastic on-rail shooters, from the excellent *Ghost Squad*, to Capcom's *Resident Evil Chronicles* series. Sadly, this effort from Next Level Games isn't really worth bothering with for anyone other than collectors, despite trying to do something new with the series. It's essentially an extremely ropey cover-based shooter with your soldiers shambling from cover to cover. Aiming is handled with the Wii control, but it's nowhere near as accurate as similar shooters, and frustration soon sets in. The gameplay is broken up with the odd ride in a vehicle and the co-op at least lets a friend share your tedium, but it can't hide the fact that *Ghost Recon* is as dull as it looks.




SHADOW WARS 2011

SYSTEM: NINTENDO DS

Surprisingly, this turn-based strategy game turned out to be one of the best things about the 3DS launch. Even more surprising was that it was the child of strategy king, Julian Gollop, who at the time was working for Ubisoft Sofia. While *Shadow Wars* plays similarly to the likes of *Advance Wars* and *Fire Emblem*, it has a grittier style and focuses on cover-based gameplay. In fact, fans of Gollop's previous games will be instantly at home as it adopts similar gameplay mechanics. The campaign mode itself is huge with 37 missions to conquer, while there's a solid range of characters that cover a variety of classes, from snipers to medics. The already lengthy campaign is bolstered by 20 standalone skirmish missions and a highly enjoyable multiplayer mode that can be played from a single console. Sadly, Ubisoft has neglected the series, and Gollop's focus on *Chaos Reborn* means we could be waiting for some time.



H.A.W.X. 2 2010

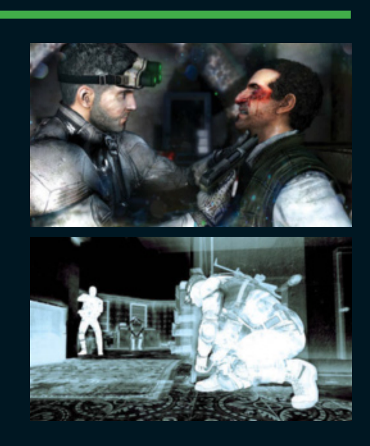
SYSTEM: VARIOUS

For some reason, Ubisoft Romania's sequel lacks the spark that made the original *H.A.W.X.* fun to play. It's not bad, but it feels a little too complicated compared to its predecessor, even if the greater focus on co-operative play is a welcome one. *H.A.W.X. 2* is also the first game in the series to make its appearance on Nintendo's Wii, but it's a wasted effort thanks to naff controls, ugly looking visuals and overly simplistic missions.

SPLINTER CELL: BLACKLIST 2013

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

The last current *Splinter Cell* ends on a high, with new guy Eric Johnson ably stepping into Michael Ironside's previous role and the gameplay improving on the changes introduced in *Conviction*. It's also marks the return of the Spies Vs Mercs multiplayer mode that was so popular in *Pandora Tomorrow*.





GHOST RECON: JUNGLE STORM

YEAR: 2004

This standalone expansion for the PlayStation 2 included the whole of *Island Thunder* as well as eight new single-player missions. A vastly cut-down N-Gage version also exists.



RAINBOW SIX 3: BLACK ARROW

YEAR: 2004

The Xbox received a number of exclusive standalone games, with *Black Arrow* being one of the better ones. It was praised for its online modes and introduced two new game modes.



RAINBOW SIX 3: ATHENA SWORD

YEAR: 2004

The first add-on for *Raven Shield* was undeniably a weak one, despite the addition of plenty of new single-player and multiplayer maps. Interestingly, it's only available for PC.



RAINBOW SIX 3: IRON WRATH

YEAR: 2004

Developed in collaboration with Ubisoft Casablanca, the *Iron Wrath* expansion is notable for being given away from free to Fileplanet subscribers after a two year production.



GHOST RECON 2: SUMMIT STRIKE

YEAR: 2005

This direct sequel to *Ghost Recon 2* was exclusive to Xbox and is split between "Lone Wolf" missions and traditional squad-based campaigns.



BEHIND THE SCENES

WARHAWK



Released: 1995
Format: PlayStation
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Key Staff: Mike Giam (Associate Producer), Will Dougherty (Design), Kellan Hatch (Design), Hunter Luisi (Design), Mike Mason (Design)

Criminally underrated, SingleTrac's epic action title was one of the 32-bit PlayStation's first western-developed games and took the genre to new heights

UTTER THE NAME *Warhawk* to any modern gamer and they will almost certainly think of the excellent 2007 PlayStation 3 online shooter from Incognito Entertainment, and – by association – its 2012 spiritual sequel, *Starhawk*. However, those with slightly longer memories will recall a title of bearing the same name nestled among the original 32-bit PlayStation's early library. It was this oft-ignored 1995 release – one of the first western-developed releases for the console, in fact – which would inspire the later PS3 update, but it's easy to see why so many believe the remake to be wholly original. The 32-bit version is underrated, under-appreciated and – to many – an unknown entity, lost amid the shining stars of the system's early back catalogue and unfairly relegated to the status of a footnote in Sony's gaming history.

Despite its lack of enduring fame, *Warhawk* was nevertheless an ambitious undertaking given the relative inexperience in games development of its creator, SingleTrac Entertainment Technologies. Based in Salt Lake City, Utah and boasting a military simulation background, SingleTrac would have the honour of working closely with Sony Computer Entertainment in those early years to produce the vital opening salvos of the western PlayStation launch

period. "Many of the first SingleTrac folks were formerly of Evans & Sutherland," explains *Warhawk* associate producer Mike Giam. "They did a lot of military simulation-type work; not games, the real thing! I recall being incredibly amazed at how well these talented folks – who had never made games before – managed to adapt and adjust to the PlayStation platform right out of the gate and make some amazing things."

Giam is a Sony Computer Entertainment veteran and started his career in the games industry right at the bottom. "I graduated from UCLA with a bachelor's of science in Chemistry, but my entry to the industry came through working retail at the Virgin Megastore in Hollywood," he recalls. "I was working in the game section and was offered a position as a tester by some folks from Sony Imagesoft – this was before Sony Computer Entertainment America existed. My first design credit was on *Mickey Mania*, a game I worked on with David Jaffe and which was developed by Traveller's Tales – how's that for good luck? I was fortunate enough to still be part of Sony as the PlayStation came into being." The timing might seem ideal, but it's important to remember that the Sony Giam was joining was a different beast to the one we know today. Unlike its rivals Sega and Nintendo, the reputation of Sony's in-house development talent arguably couldn't have been any lower. Sony Imagesoft had been responsible for some of the most reprehensible videogames of the 8- and 16-bit eras – including *3 Ninjas Kick Back*, *Cliffhanger*, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, *Hudson Hawk* and *Last Action Hero*. It simply didn't have the internal talent that Sega and Nintendo could call upon, and it was assumed at the time that any new format needed first-party software to truly succeed.

Sony was understandably keen to change the perception the industry had of its internal teams and establish a legacy that would ensure its new system was a triumph. A unique joint venture between



A Windows version of the game was originally planned, but ultimately cancelled.

■ Kreel in all his insane glory. The tubes going into his body deliver Red Mercury, a substance which bestows incredible physical power.

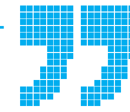


WHAT THEY SAID…



Warhawk puts you in the cockpit of a sophisticated Harrier-style jet flying through six long, tough missions. This is one of the best new PlayStation shooters

GamePro (January 1996)



SingleTrac and Sony Computer Entertainment, *Warhawk* was one of the many titles that Sony hoped would illustrate its credentials in the games arena – credentials that were still very much in doubt, despite the overwhelmingly positive reaction to the PlayStation hardware. "I recall initially feeling some concern about how we'd be received," says Giam. "Sony Computer Entertainment's precursor, Sony Imagesoft, hardly had the reputation that SCE has earned since then." Still, working alongside the team at SingleTrac, Sony's internal team started to find its confidence and became aware that it had the chance to work on something special that could surprise the doubters. "As soon as we started getting things onto the hardware, all there was room for was the excitement over the potential," Giam explains. "It's hard to describe how wild it was making games set in 3D polygonal worlds after so many years of 2D, sprite-based games."

Giam's status as a long-standing Sony employee means he is perfectly positioned to explain just how big a shift it was moving from the 2D world to the all-singing, all-dancing realm of 3D. "It was quite a shock," he replies when asked about his first reaction to seeing Sony's all-conquering system in the flesh. "There was the aspect of visual fidelity of course – who could forget that T-Rex demo – but I remember being more enamoured with the amount of freedom it offered. The early days when we were free-flying around in *Warhawk* for the first time, or tooling around in *Twisted Metal* [SingleTrac's other big release at the time], playing hide and seek in the levels – it was all amazing. While there were PC titles that let you do similar things, there was something awesome about doing on console, on your couch in your living room, with your buddy sitting next to you."

Viewed with modern eyes accustomed to visuals so realistic it's hard to distinguish them from reality, the power of the original PlayStation seems laughable now, but it has to be taken in the context of the time. The games industry was emerging from the 2D funk of the Mega Drive and SNES era, where developers were crying out for additional processing power and were forced to pack special chips in cartridges – such as Nintendo's SFX or the Sega's SVP – to achieve anything even close to competent 3D visuals. The PlayStation heralded a new era packed with promise, and its impact on developers was intoxicating.

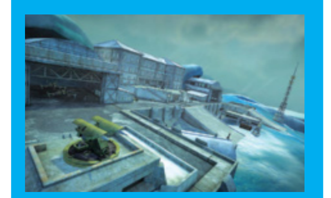
IT'S HARD TO DESCRIBE HOW WILD IT WAS MAKING GAMES SET IN 3D POLYGONAL WORLDS AFTER YEARS OF 2D

"I realise the PlayStation stuff looks pretty primitive by modern standards, but back then we were seeing gameplay and player reactions we had not seen before," Giam continues. Sony's Japanese line-up of games was showing the way forward and inspiring its western teams. "One of the early games, *Jumping Flash*, was surprisingly intense," says Giam. "You played as this robo-rabbit that jumped incredibly high – what felt like several stories. I distinctly remember when you'd leap up to this insanely high ledge and while you did the camera would automatically pan down toward the ground far below. I laugh at it now when I see it in video, but back then it actually gave me a little twinge in the pit of my stomach. It was that new an experience."

RISING FROM THE ASHES

How Sony revived a forgotten 32-bit gem for the PS3 era

THE 2007 REMAKE of *Warhawk* may have made the name famous again, but it had very little in common with the 1995 original, besides the obvious flying elements. A single-player campaign was mooted then dropped in favour of producing a totally online experience based around a variety of modes. Initially revealed in 2005, the game was distributed in a unique manner, with both download and physical editions available. It would be Incognito's final release, and the studio is now defunct.





Warhawk associate producer Mike Giam and offspring, snapped during the '90s (as if the hairstyle didn't make that obvious enough).

It was into this brave new world that Sony and the team at SingleTrac launched *Warhawk*, a full-3D air combat title that was striking in scope for such an early PlayStation release. Operating a VTOL attack ship which was capable of full 360-degree movement, the game took the linear template established by other 3D console titles and tore it to pieces. "The original vision for what eventually became *Warhawk* was to create a sort of next-generation take on *Desert Strike*," explains Giam. Despite his obvious affection for the game and the time he spent working on it, Giam wasn't actually part of the development team from the very beginning, and was instead introduced after production had begun in order to steer the project in the right direction. "I was actually part of the *Twisted Metal* team with David Jaffe," he says. "I was shifted over to *Warhawk* midway through development to focus it a bit and help bring it across the finish line."

Giam therefore cannot say exactly what titles influenced the gameplay seen in *Warhawk*, although the names *After Burner* and *Star Fox* crop up in conversation. Regardless of which games may or may not have provided inspiration, he feels that ultimately it was SingleTrac's military heritage and experience that really drove the design – as well as Sony's natural desire to make a triple-A blockbuster that would give the PlayStation some forward momentum in the west. "As far as gameplay influences went, I think it was a combination of the SingleTrac folks' natural bent for flying action and the Sony-side penchant for over-the-top action," he comments. "While it may have been a flying shooter genre-wise, for me it was almost simply an arcade flying game that just happened to shoot. I cannot recall the early steps that led to it flying the way it did, but I do know that once the SingleTrac folks got that Immelmann-style manoeuvre into the game, finding gameplay that encouraged those kinds of swooping dynamics was an immediate goal." For those of you that don't know, the Immelmann Turn – named after German World War I flying ace Max Immelmann – is a aerial combat move which comprises of an ascending half-loop followed by a half-roll, allowing you to fly in the opposite direction in one smooth movement. It would be used in *Star Fox 64*'s all-range segments a couple of years later, but *Warhawk* got there first.

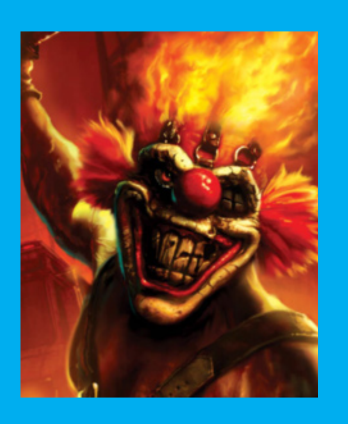
Creating this sense of aerial freedom was arguably the team's biggest challenge and presented Giam with plenty of personal headaches, largely because he was entirely new to this type of game design. "From a design side it was pretty tricky envisioning 3D gameplay after having cut my teeth mostly on 2D arcade games," he says. "That meant I was trying to expand on creative sensibilities shaped by arcade experiences intended to roll over players in rapid succession – this was in contrast to the longer



TWISTING AND TURNING

SingleTrac's other early PlayStation release created a cult franchise

■ Not a company to do things by halves, *Warhawk* wasn't the only iron in the fire for Sony when it launched the PlayStation in the west. Also in development at SingleTrac was vehicular combat game *Twisted Metal*. Released a week earlier in North America, this is perhaps one of the most iconic of the western-developed PlayStation exclusives. It marked the design debut of David Jaffe, who had previously worked as a tester and designer at Sony Imagesoft. Jaffe would later find fame as the director of the *God Of War* titles, while the *Twisted Metal* series now includes eight mainline releases and two spin-offs and has sold over 15 million copies worldwide to date. Interestingly, both *Twisted Metal* and *Warhawk* started with the same code base and were both shown off at the 1995 Electronic Entertainment Expo with great fanfare. As the two biggest western-developed titles of the PlayStation lineup a lot was expected of these releases, and while both were commercial successes, it would be *Twisted Metal* which would go on to become the established franchise while *Warhawk* had to wait until 2007 before it got another crack at fame. Jaffe – now at his own studio Eat Sleep Play – returned to the *Twisted Metal* franchise with a sequel in 2012.



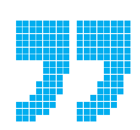


WHAT THEY SAID...



A top-quality flight sim/shoot 'em up/movie/ stratgy game that remains constantly interesting and challenging

Computer & Video Games (January 1996)



duration home experiences, which allowed for more pacing variety in gameplay." Despite his lack of experience, Giam feels the title was a success – especially given the fresh ground it was breaking. "I'm mostly proud that it was a fun introduction to free-moving 3D flight that was relatively accessible for its time. On a personal note, as a *Robotech*/*Macross* fan, I also particularly liked the swarmer missiles and that the team managed find a way to implement that big capital ship level, including being able to fly inside of it. Besides just plain wanting to make more game – it was only a handful of levels long – it would have been great to explore ways to create more types of epic dogfighting, more capital ship battles – all kinds of things that unfortunately the schedule did not allow for."

Typical of the period, *Warhawk* bookends its free-roaming 3D action with live-action sequences containing real actors – an unfortunate throwback to the days before the PlayStation, when developers tried to exploit the limitless storage offered by CD-ROM technology. The quality isn't fantastic – the FMV is grainy, the costumes and sets are ropey and the quality of acting is incredibly cheesy – but somehow they add to the charm regardless, and do a passable job of furthering the game's relatively basic 'one craft against the world' story. Pilots Hatch and Walker are sent out in the XA-165 Warhawk to stop the forces of the maniacal Kreel, an evil dictator who is harnessing the power of a mysterious substance known as Red Mercury to give his troops incredible power. These video sequences aren't meant to be taken too seriously – one of the multiple endings sees Kreel overwhelmed not by the heroic efforts of Hatch and Walker, but a chicken bone, which he unceremoniously chokes on. Another ending

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN GREAT TO EXPLORE WAYS TO CREATE MORE TYPES OF EPIC DOGFIGHTING

sees a promotional skit for "I Survived the Red Mercury War" while one of the less happy conclusions sees our two heroes served up as the main course at Kreel's victory celebration. As well as raising a laugh, the different endings gave players a solid reason to play through the title's admittedly short campaign multiple times.

Despite its short length and archaic use of a password system to retain progress, *Warhawk* gained positive reviews at the time of release and sold well enough to be reissued as part of Sony's 'Greatest Hits' range, but it is often unfairly overshadowed by SingleTrac's other big PlayStation venture. "It was nowhere near the commercial success of its sister project, *Twisted Metal*," remembers Giam. "I recall it being fairly well received critically, although that might be coloured by the lens of my pleasant memories! Do I wish it had sold better? Of course, but in the end, I still feel quite a bit of pride when folks mention it positively. It is flattering to think that something I was a part of still stands out in people's memories amid the multitude of games that have come and gone over the years."



■ Meet Walker and Hatch, humanity's only hope against the relentless forces of Kreel. The game's FMV scenes are so bad, they're almost good.

The game's cult status clearly had something to do with the brand being resurrected for the PlayStation

> GAMING EVOLUTION

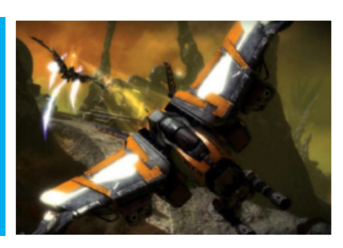
Warhawk (1995) > Warhawk (2007) > Starhawk



Warhawk gave players freedom at a time when they were more accustomed to locked-down, 2D experiences with limited scope



Starhawk placed the action in the far future and this time around incorporated a solid solo story, taking combat to new heights





The one giving the orders is naturally a sassy and attractive female officer who is thankfully immune to Walker and Hatch's charms.

3 in 2007. Developer Incognito Entertainment had the required pedigree; it was made up of former SingleTrac staffers who left the studio – by this point owned by French publisher Infogrames – around 1999, a year before it was totally closed. While Giam was still with Sony at this time, he wasn't part of the team which made the new *Warhawk*. "I was at Sony Santa Monica while that project was running, but I was not really involved with it unfortunately," he says. Still, this meant that he was able to assess the title from a purely neutral perspective – just like any other gamer – and he happily found it a worthy successor to the 32-bit original. "I was really impressed with how much action they managed to pack into its gameplay flow. I haven't met many folks who have played it that didn't have great things to say." His only reservation is the lack of a single-player campaign – something that was planned but dropped in the final game. "I do wish that they had somehow managed to find time and resources to later make the epic story-based experience they wanted to. I recall the early concepts, and It could have been amazing."

Sony would revisit the concept with *Starhawk* in 2012 – developed by LightBox Interactive, a splinter studio formed after Incognito's apparent 2009 shuttering. More a spiritual successor than a straight sequel to the 2007 *Warhawk*, it's a game that Giam has a lot of time for, as it adds-in the solo campaign that he felt would have completed the previous entry. "It is a really nice piece of work, and seems to be the PlayStation 3 *Warhawk* team's vision of where they felt the franchise should go. It really is quite the spectacle." Positive reviews followed, although launching towards the end of the PlayStation 3's lifespan arguably harmed its chances of long-term fame. It remains to be seen if the *Warhawk* brand will ever be brought out of storage again. Giam is hopeful, primarily because this particular genre offers a buzz few others can match. "I really hope Sony revisits the franchise in the future," he says. "No matter how much tech advances, I'd like to think that an exhilarating aerial dogfight is as much a summer blockbuster-style experience as a thrilling shootout or a great car chase."

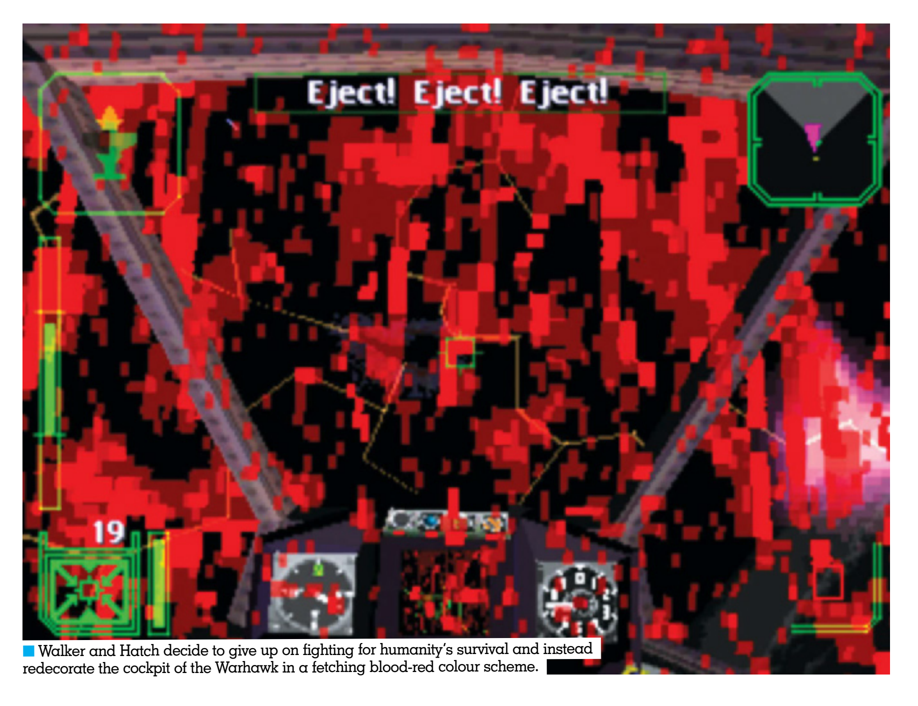
Giam is no longer a Sony employee, having left in 2006 to pursue other interests. "In the end I was there for about 14 years, enough time to be first party during the rise of the PlayStation, PlayStation 2, PlayStation Portable, and early PlayStation 3," he explains. He now works at Schell Games on PC titles, interactive installations, VR projects and theme park attractions, and while he's clearly having a blast exploring new arenas of interactive entertainment, his one regret regarding *Warhawk* is that he wasn't able to take the concept to the next level and create a truly mind-blowing experience. "I wish I'd gotten the chance to see what an epic adventure with the heart of *Warhawk* would be like," he says today with a hint of sadness. "I remember hoping that Crimson Skies would scratch my flight and high adventure itch, but it really only served to make me want to make one myself. Hopefully there will eventually be another *Warhawk*, and someone with a passion for the genre will be at the helm. I'd love to play it. In fact, I'd love to make another one myself!"



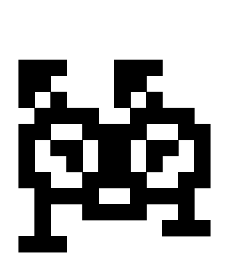
The XA-165 Warhawk fighter comes equipped with multiple weapons, including powerful lock-on missiles and Macross-style swarming rockets.



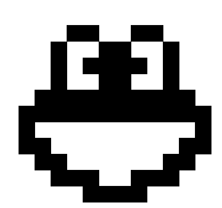




Walker and Hatch decide to give up on fighting for humanity's survival and instead redecorate the cockpit of the Warhawk in a fetching blood-red colour scheme.







RETRO

INTERVIEW

JAS AUSTIN

From an Easter-themed BASIC game to the iOS version of a classic strategy game, Jas Austin has seen it all, and more. **games™** caught up with the industry veteran at his home in sunny Portsmouth

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Rex (1988)
Programmer



R-Type (1991)
Programmer



Constantine (2005)
Programmer

What was the first game you played?
I was friends with Mel Croucher and Christian Penfold [Automata] as they were based near me. I saw an advert for their games and thought they looked fun, so went and knocked on their door and asked if I could buy a game, *Can Of Worms*. They said no, because I was too young as it was an 18 game. I was a bit upset, so Mel said 'Come back with your mum and if she says it's alright you can have it'. So I went back with my Mum and she said it was fine. It wasn't even that bad, although in one of the games you had to pee into a urinal, almost like an early version of *Angry Birds*. Lots of silly games which I played to death on my ZX81.

What was it that got you into games?
It started in the arcades. I used to spend my summer holidays in Portsmouth and my family would dump me at the arcades with a bag full of change. I liked games such as *Donkey Kong* and *Jump Bug* but shooters such as *Scramble* were my favourites – I think I preferred blowing shit up! Then my school had a Sinclair ZX80 and it was wondrous, even though looking back it was a terrible machine. With the ZX81 I started getting interested in games. I hated my paper round, so I saved up until I had enough to buy one, then told the newsagent to stuff their job. I never released anything on it, but I learnt BASIC and small bits of machine code, all self-taught, so that's where my love of programming began.

How did you end up getting involved with Mel Croucher and Christian Penfold's software house Automata?
They were local heroes – they ran a games company and also a computer club which I attended. One Easter, Mel decided to have a competition and asked anyone to submit Easter-themed games. I think I was one of only two who entered and we both won! My game, *Bunny*, was terrible but they released it and I got £25 for it. Well, actually I didn't, because I told Mel what I wanted was some memory for my 16k Spectrum. I found out later he was able to get that sort of stuff really cheap, but I didn't care as it got me my foot in the door. I was still a kid.

> **I CODED PI-BALLED WHICH MAY – AHEM – HAVE SLIGHTLY RIPPED OFF Q-BERT. AN HOMAGE. THAT'S IT. AN HOMAGE**

What came next?
With my newly-upgraded Spectrum I wanted to write something bigger and better, so learned



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

"JAS WAS BY far the best bespectacled underage undersized over-talented entry we received when we thought it would be fun to give kids a chance to get ripped off and find fame. He still blames me for leading him astray into a lifetime of games creation, and he also claims I owe him almost a quid in unpaid royalties. I gained three lifetime friendships from the programmers I admired back them, and Jas Austin is one of them. In fact, he was one of the last men standing at my 60th birthday extravaganza a few years back."

Mel Croucher





DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

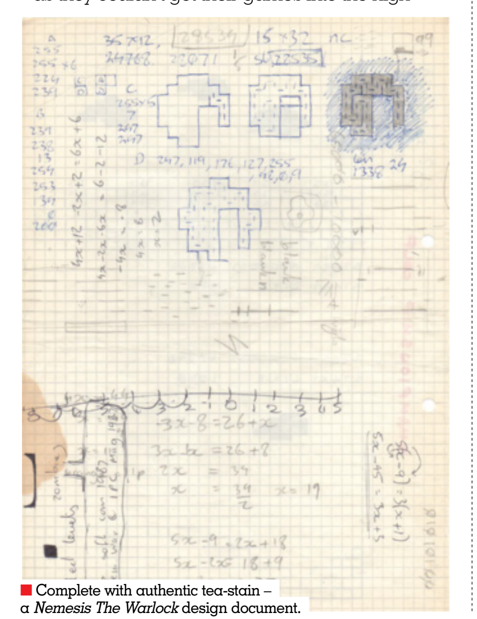
"I WAS ACTUALLY only 18 when I started working with Jas, and he'd already written a load of stuff. I remember thinking 'Shit, this guy knows what he's doing – I've got a load of catching up to do and a lot to learn!'"

Neil Dodwell

Creative Reality circa 1988: Neil Dodwell, Dave Dew and Jas Austin, complete with an impressive mullet.

machine code for my next game, *Pi-Balled* and started working with Colin Tuck who wrote the other competition game. I coded *Pi-Balled* which may – ahem – have slightly ripped off *Q-bert*. An homage. That's it. An homage. We got £250 each plus royalties – I really felt like I'd hit the big time!

We also did *Pi-In-Ere*, which was another arcade rip-off, a sort-of mashup of *Mr. Do!*, *Dig Dug* and *Boulderdash*. Both our skillsets had gone up dramatically, it had over 40 levels, loads more graphics and it was hand-built and designed. The whole story was that you were the bird character from *Pi-Balled* and were transported inside the computer. So there was a 'Pi-In-Ere'. Nowadays we spend weeks naming a game. Back then we just went down the pub and picked something that sounded cool. Unfortunately Automata were struggling by then as they couldn't get their games into the high street and mail order was dying. It was a bit disappointing but it wasn't their fault, they publicised the game as much as they could. Mel always seemed like a genuine guy and not the sort to rip you off.



Complete with authentic tea-stain – a *Nemesis The Warlock* design document.

Pi-In-Ere was your final game for Automata. What happened next?

I'd realised that I really enjoyed writing games and wanted to make career of it. I had a chance meeting with a guy called David Wainwright who had set up a games company. I showed them this game I'd been working on called *Colourscape*, which was this crazy thing I'd written based on John Conway's life formula. It had a life grid and guns in the corners which you fired to create cells in the middle to try and keep alive. It was very abstract, but beautiful, and unsurprisingly he said no. But he offered me a job. I met an artist called Dave Dew and our first game was a licence of *Tarzan* for Martech.

We watched a bunch of Tarzan movies and did a side-view game with a nicely-animated character. It wasn't a great game and took a long time, but it was my first major release. In my spare time I'd also been working on a downward-scrolling shoot-'em-up called *Tac*, which Catalyst found out about. They changed the name to *War* and it was the Spectrum conversion of a Commodore 64 game, which was originally a horizontal-scroller.

But they were my only games for them as they were in financial difficulties. So Dave, myself and another Catalyst coder, Neil Dodwell, started our own company, Creative Reality. Luckily we got on well with David Martin [Martech boss], so he took us on as a development house.

Your first game for Martech was another licensed release.

We were huge *2000AD* fans, and my favourite strip was *Nemesis The Warlock*, so that was thrilling. There was an initial meeting where I gave my thoughts on the game's design and that was it. We picked a few things from the comic to feature such as the spitting acid, sword and gun. I always get asked about the piling up the bodies thing too. That idea must have come from the comic, we were just plucking ideas out and hoping they'd all stick together. It wasn't a Crash Smash, but I was quite pleased with it, and then there was *Slaine*…

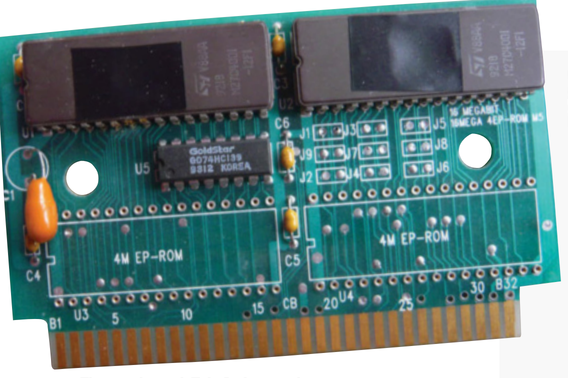
We were trying to something new, and I'd been playing a lot of text adventures, so was thinking about combining them to make something different. We called it Reflex and were hoping to make a big thing out of it, like it was some incredible new technology. The theory was that Slaine is a berserker and it was trying to simulate his fevered mind with all these random actions drifting around, but it was too frustrating. You couldn't even do simple things easily – if you wanted to 'go west' you had to wait for it to appear. It looked nice, Dave's graphics were top-notch, but I'd be the first to admit it didn't really work as a game. It had some unusual ideas and I'm still proud because it's talked about today, even if for the wrong reasons!

Slaine and follow-up game, _The Fury_, weren't great sellers. Did you fear you'd get dropped?

We did a demo after Dave created this cool character with a *Defender*-esque laser weapon. It gave us one more game, *Rex*, but they ended our contract after that. Martech were on a downward slide and Dave, Neil and I went our separate ways too. Fortunately, my agent was friends with BITS founder Foo Katan and got me an interview. That was odd. I turned up at this little office above an electrical shop and there were a couple of other bleary-eyed programmers. Foo asked me if I thought I could convert the arcade game *R-Type* to the Game Boy. I had absolutely no clue how to, but said 'Of course I can'! BITS needed a demo in two weeks, and I left their office with a demo kit.



The ambitious, yet baffling *Slaine*.



■ The unreleased *Fido Dido* cartridge.



■ Despite being a Game Boy coding novice, Austin produced an excellent conversion of the classic arcade game *R-Type*.

You ended up creating a few film licences for BITS, but got into a bit of a pickle with the Game Boy version of *Terminator 2*…

Any face shots for Arnie had to go through his lawyer, hence only seeing the back of his head on close-ups. But the biggest problem with the film company was with Linda Hamilton's character. They kept sending back the comment that her 'bangs' were too small. We thought this meant breasts, so they kept saying it, and we kept making the breasts bigger and bigger. Only after a few conversations we found out that bangs are American slang for fringe…

So then you did some SNES development at BITS?

I did a game called *Fido Dido*, which was unreleased, and an *Itchy And Scratchy* game from *The Simpsons*, which was a bit of a problem project; I think I was the fifth coder to work on it. Matt Groening was difficult to work with on the visual side and a lot of stuff went backwards and forwards. *Fido Dido* was a French cartoon that we only knew in the UK as the character from 7 Up. The publisher got bought out and stopped doing games – that was a shame as it had some nice ideas such as a yoyo for a weapon and a unicycle level.

It seems like you had a lot of projects on the go – you then worked on the original design for a PC game called *Dreamweb* and a couple more abandoned games for BITS?

I was working on an N64 game called *Thieves World* and Nintendo were quite keen on it. Miyamoto even visited our offices. It was third-person stealth game and originally had no guns at all in it. It was stuck for ages and finally materialised as *Rogue Ops* for the GameCube. By then I was part of a big team and was quite good at character and control, so did most of that.



And you worked on a proposed virtual reality game too?

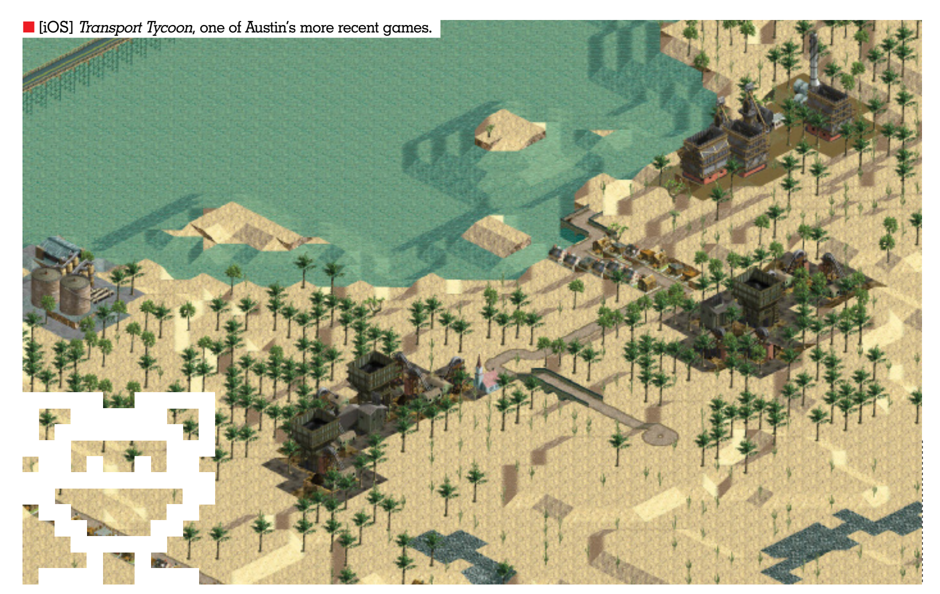
It was called *Nihilist*, and I did it with Martin Wheeler. I designed this basic turret-shooter using the VR hardware. It was working really nicely, but the hardware was too expensive. BITS reckoned they needed to do it under £100, but it was looking more like £500, so they shelved the unit. But we had a half-finished game, so changed it into a free-roaming shoot-'em-up. Martin's a fantastic designer with a terrific imagination and we had a lot of great characters. But there were a lot of space games out there, so I don't think it was successful.

After working on *Rogue Ops* and the adaptation of *Constantine*, you followed Foo Katan to his new operation Origin8.

Foo is a good reader of a market and with the iPhone coming out he saw potential, and hired freelancers to produce games for the casual market. We had an office in Camden for a short while but now we just work from home and have weekly Skype calls. My last project was *Transport Tycoon* and I'm currently working on *Future Sense*, a stealth mystery adventure with a time travel twist.

You've worked in the industry a long time. How do you look back at your career, and what games are you proudest of?

It's crazy looking back and seeing what's become of the industry today in comparison. But I'm proud to have been part of that early period and I worked with and met a lot of great people back then. *Rex* is my favourite game – it all came together for that one – and I'm also proud that we tried something different with games like *Slaine*. In some ways it's come full circle with iOS development and actually I don't feel like I'm doing anything different to what I was doing 20 years ago. And, yeah, I still love it!


■ [iOS] *Transport Tycoon*, one of Austin's more recent games.



GAME CHANGERS

CRASH BANDICOOT

Released: 31 August 1996 **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer:** Naughty Dog **System:** PlayStation



Crash Bandicoot has sold over 6.8 million units – making it one of the best selling PlayStation games of all time, establishing Crash himself as one of Sony's iconic characters.

The platformer that showed off the potential of the Sony PlayStation at an early age is the same game that put Naughty Dog on the industry's map. Getting Crash from concept to release was no easy task, but it paid dividends for Sony, Universal and everyone else involved in Naughty Dog's passion project…

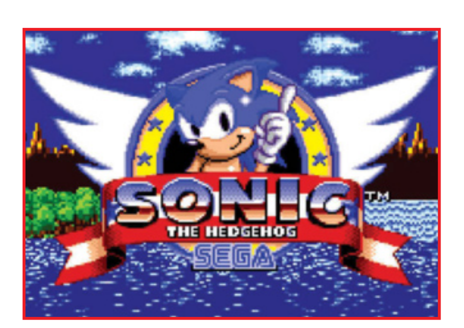
CRASH BANDICOOT WENT on a long journey before making it to the forefront of the PlayStation's exemplary early-life line-up – when Naughty Dog moved onto the game, it wasn't even set in stone as a PlayStation release; the developer flirted with 3DO, Atari Jaguar and Sega Saturn as a viable release platform for the game before settling on Sony's PlayStation… purely because of how streamlined the development units were, and how 'sexy' the advertising campaign had made the machine look early in its life.

So by 1994, Naughty Dog had approached Universal Interactive Studios, set up shop in the publisher's backlot, and began to work on a character that would be a mascot for the blossoming PlayStation console: Sega had managed to propel Sonic to mascot status early in the Mega Drive's lifespan, and Mario had been doing the rounds for Nintendo for over a decade at this point. Naughty Dog noted this, and took design notes from characters that existed before and amalgamated them into Crash's earliest form: Willie the Wombat.

Once the character was in place, Naughty Dog would begin the most important development cycle the PlayStation would see in its early life – *Crash Bandicoot* didn't just solve coding/hardware problems related to its game, it also managed to figure out shortcuts and 'hacks' in the PlayStation's infrastructure that would be passed on to other developers, allowing them to extract even more power from the fledgling system.

THE ANATOMY OF CRASH BANDICOOT

CRASH BANDICOOT WAS A WATERSHED MOMENT FOR PLATFORM GAMING, AND STARTED A RICH CULTURE OF GAMES BASED ON THAT 2.5D/3D TEMPLATE… BUT WHAT INSPIRED IT IN THE FIRST PLACE?



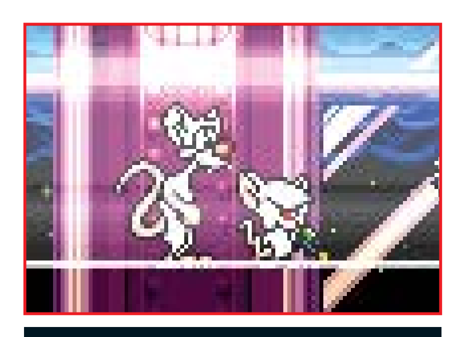
SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

★ The *Sonic* template was studied closely when making *Crash*, but Naughty Dog wanted to move the camera behind the main character rather than have it side-on.



TASMANIAN ANIMALS

★ When researching mascot characters, one of the artists bought in a field guide to Tasmanian animals – Crash Bandicoot could easily have been a wombat.



PINKY AND THE BRAIN

★ Main antagonist Neo Cortex was to be a 'more malevolent' Brain in the game, obsessed with minions, with N. Brio acting more like Pinky.

It all started out when design veterans Joe Pearson and Charles Zembillas were brought in to design the characters and the world, opting for smooth, squash-and-stretch-style animations that would riff off the Looney Tunes art direction. *Crash Bandicoot* was one of the first games on the market to apply 'soft-body animations' to gaming – and it was all based on the Disney-produced theory book *The Illusion Of Life*. Many games would follow Naughty Dog's lead with this kind of animation – the studio was a trail-blazer.

Initially, the game was going to utilise a full 3D camera, but Andy Gavin and Dave Baggett (the only two programmers on the whole project!) soon ran into hardware limitations, and so Crash's iconic 3D pathways were chosen as level templates instead. This meant that Crash was always kept on a 'spline', and that the PSOne could calculate *exactly* what would be shown on-screen at any one time – in the first *Crash Bandicoot*, this was only 900 polygons at any one time.

As such, the team managed to cram several hundred thousand environment meshes into the level, but only render a handful of them at any one time… a 'cheat' that allowed Crash to look so good, so vibrant, so *rich*, despite its 1996 release. Because of the way the camera followed Crash in a third-person view – a reinterpretation of the classic platformers that launched Nintendo and Sega consoles – the game was widely referred to as 'Sonic's Ass Game' until the name *Crash Bandicoot* stuck, fairly late on in development.

■■■ To make sure the player would understand *exactly* where the orange-furred bandicoot was at all times, the design team gave Crash black gloves and dark shoes – allowing you to at least read his silhouette if he was washed out against the bright vistas the game was rendering. It was another smart move from the team, one that you'll see imitated in everything that came after, and helped Crash stick out against its only real genre competition at the time – *Donkey Kong Country*.

Strangely enough, one of the most famous elements of the *Crash Bandicoot* series – the mysterious 'wumpa fruit' – was added incredibly late on in development, when the team discovered that play-testers were solving the game's puzzles too quickly, and when focus groups complained of empty, wide-open spaces in the games visual language. Director Jason Rubin and programmer Andy Gavin took a Saturday in the workplace to texture, design and implement the fruit, as well as the crates they were found in (and a bonus TNT crate to make things just a *bit* more difficult).

All this iteration and attention to detail led to one of the most technically solid 3D platformers the world had seen, and it gave the PlayStation the mascot character it needed as Sony continued the relentless campaign to push the console into the homes of not just the players that were upgrading from the Mega Drive or SNES, but the general population… as such, *Crash Bandicoot* was a *lot* of now-adult gamer's introduction to videogames. And what an introduction to have.

KEY FACTS

■ Dr. Neo Cortex was invented as the design team were served a 'mediocre' Italian meal from a waiter with a large head…

■ Naughty Dog paid over $35,000 for its first PlayStation development kit!

■ The composer of the game's OST – Josh Mancell – has cited Aphex Twin as an influence for the game's chaotic, off-kilter soundtrack

THE GAME WAS WIDELY REFERRED TO AS 'SONIC'S ASS GAME' UNTIL THE NAME CRASH BANDICOOT STUCK





GAME CHANGERS

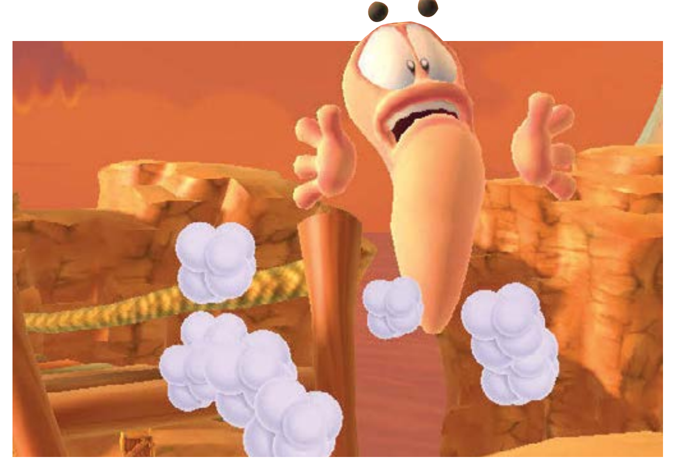
8 BRILLIANT COMEDY DEATHS IN GAMES

CRASH BANDICOOT BECAME WELL KNOWN FOR THE MYRIAD WAYS IN WHICH CRASH COULD PERISH – FLATTENED, DEFLATED, SQUASHED, GORED BY BOARS – BUT HE'S CERTAINLY NOT THE ONLY CHARACTER TO MEET HIS END COMICALLY…



EATING BOB THE GOLDFISH

EARTHWORM JIM 2 takes potshots at lots of gaming tropes. The best realisation of this is when you encounter Bob the Goldfish in the second game, and a full on *Mortal Kombat*-style lead-up to the battle makes you think this is going to be a harsh encounter… until Jim simply picks Bob out of his bowl and eats him.



PRODDED INTO OBLIVION

WE WERE DEBATING whether to include getting a 'home run' with a baseball bat, dropping a concrete donkey, flinging a sheep… but no. The best *Worms* death – in *every* game in the series – has to be the simple prod. A small poke to an enemy and seeing their face drop as they plunge into watery oblivion… So satisfying.



SHOOTING FACE MCSHOOTY IN THE FACE

■ APPEARING IN THE *Borderlands 2* mission titled 'Shoot This Guy In The Face', Face McShooty wants you to, well, shoot him. In the face. Shoot him anywhere else and he'll get quite aggressive, asking if you indeed even know what a face *is*.



ACCIDENTALLY KILLING A PATIENT

■ BLOATY HEADS, SLACK Tongues, Invisible Men, Uncommon Colds and Heaped Piles. Fail to treat these afflicted patients in *Theme Hospital* right and they'll die. That will upset your other patients and even cause the Grim Reaper to languidly appear from nowhere and summon the departed to walk with them to Hell.



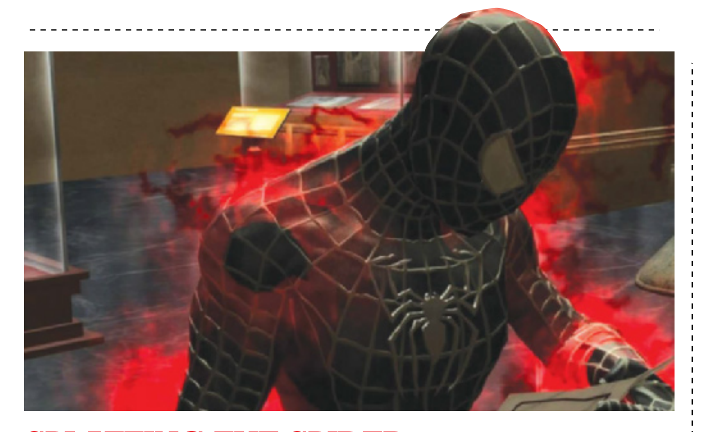
SETTING YOUR SIMS ON FIRE

■ WE'RE ALL SADISTS, there's no point in denying it. That's why *The Sims* exists, right? Lock them in a room with nothing but clown portraits to look at until they die, put them in a pool and delete the stairs… Our personal favourite was always getting a big group of them together and putting a sofa *right* next to the fireplace…



SHOOT THE LAKE

■ BEFORE ANY GUIDES came out for *Resident Evil 4*, the lake monster was a huge surprise. We simply wanted to stand on the pier in the lake and shoot some fish for the extra points, but no, we didn't realise that emptying a whole handgun into the lake would summon its gargantuan guardian, who pops out and swallows you whole.



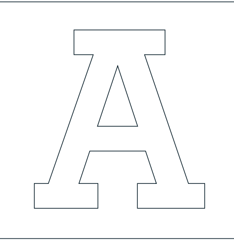
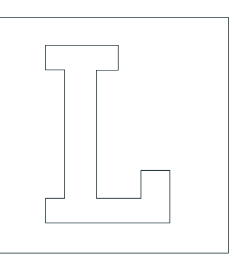
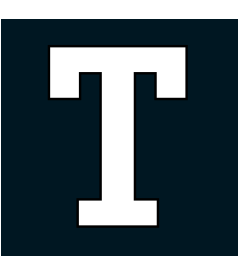
SPLATTING THE SPIDER

■ SPIDER-MAN 3 WAS FULL of bugs, but it's the emotional scene in a burning building that provides this hilarious death. Screw up the QTE input at the last minute, and you'll faceplant the floor (with a *horrible* squishy animation) and the building explodes with you in it. It shouldn't be funny, but the bad graphics and general low quality makes it *so good*.



RUN OVER BY AN AMBULANCE

■ WHEN A PLAYER goes down injured in *John Madden Football '92*, for some utterly bizarre and unknown reason, an ambulance bursts onto the pitch and rushes to pick up the downed player… but on its way, it'll pretty much tear through any other player in its way, obliterating them en route. An ambulance that *kills people*. Amazing.

THE 



GAMEBAND+ MINECRAFT

MANUFACTURER: **GAMEBAND** PRICE: **£64.99**

FOR MINECRAFT PLAYERS on Mac and PC, there's never been an easy way to transfer saves between devices – until now. The Gameband's only purpose is to act as a mobile save point for your game worlds so that you can carry them with you, clipped to your wrist, everywhere you go. The band contains a USB 2.0 plug, as well as a small section of flash storage; simply plug in the band, open the app that is stored on it, and follow the instructions. The band itself contains the *Minecraft* save, so you can boot it directly (although you will need to sign in with your own account to play), and after the set-up, all of your worlds will be added to the band so you always have the latest version.

When you're ready to go, just unplug the band, wrap it around your wrist and click the USB into the connector. The band is compatible with Macs and PCs, and even offers an LED display that can be customised when the strap is connected to your computer – it will show an animation, the time, and the date if you wish.

The biggest downside is the form factor – plugging it into a laptop leaves the rest of the strap curling awkwardly up, and because it's 'one-size-fits-all', it's not ideal for youngsters. It's not for everyone, but it's a nice idea executed fairly well. We're expecting to see a lot more wearable items like this pop up in the coming months too.



MEGA MAN MEGA BUSTER KEY CHAIN

This tiny buster gun is a replica of Mega Man's famous arm cannon; however, rather than firing three bullets, this one simply lights up to help you unlock your door when you get back far too late.

www.thinkgeek.com



R2-D2 DESK VACCUM

You don't want a grubby desk when *Star Wars Battlefront* lands next month, so get R2 on the case. His third leg (goodness) hoovers up the dust, and you can unscrew his head to empty him. Ideal for all nerdy clean-freaks like us.

www.firebox.com



BATMAN ARKHAM KNIGHT 1/4 SCALE FIGURE

This 18" figure is based on the Dark Knight's final appearance in the *Arkham* series, and features over 25 points of articulation, along with a grapnel gun, Batarang, and belt clips.

www.thinkgeek.com

GAMING CLOTHING



8-BIT

Celebrate gaming's roots with this retro tee – featuring icons from gaming's past. Whatever you played as a kid, whether it was *Pac-Man* or *Zelda*, this shirt will help you represent the greats of games past.

www.threadless.com



MAJORA'S MASK LADIES' TANK TOP

This one is so simple that for an unknowing onlooker it may be mistaken for a meaningless design. For those in the know, however, it's a great way to show your love for a classic.

www.thinkgeek.com



POKÉ HOUSE

Teefury is known for mixing multiple genres or franchises together, and that's exactly what the artist of this shirt does, bringing a distinctly Snoopy vibe to Pikachu's ball-based home. We'd say it's a good match.

www.teefury.com

ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE GAUNTLET



SOLD BY: **UBISOFT** PRICE: **$59.00**

THIS REPLICA OF Jacob Frye's own hidden blade is designed to accurately recreate the powerful new gauntlet in *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*. Featuring a working, spring-loaded hidden (plastic) blade, this is perfect for pretending to be an Assassin, while the rope launcher and hallucinogenic dart details add that splash of realism. The whole thing is finished with simulated leather and plastic knuckledusters for taking down those pesky Templars. Perfect for fans, or for cosplayers looking for the real deal to finish off their costume.

www.store.ubiworkshop.com

HYLIAN SHIELD REPLICA

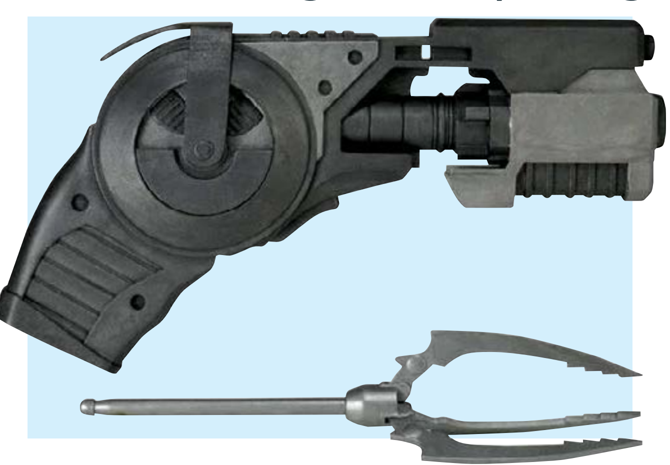
SOLD BY: **AMAZON** PRICE: **£79.99**

NO ZELDA FAN'S collection can be complete without one of these. This Hylian Shield might not be quite as sturdy as Link's own shield – mostly because it's made of fibreglass rather than magic-imbued steel. It can, of course, be worn on the arm to deflect errant Deku seeds, but it can just as easily be wall-mounted along with a sword (may we recommend you go for a Master Sword?) using the built-in metal mount. For the classic gamer, this is the perfect addition for over the fireplace.

www.trueswords.com



BATMAN: ARKHAM ORIGINS GRAPNEL GUN REPLICA

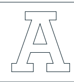


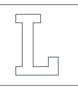
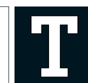
SOLD BY: **FORBIDDEN PLANET**
PRICE: **£29.99**

THIS GRAPNEL GUN might not be able to pull you up to the rooftops of Gotham's buildings, but it will help you look bloody awesome. It was created using digital files from *Batman: Arkham Origins*, so is near-identical to the Batman's own launcher, but this one will only fire the grapnel and rope a few feet into the air, rather than hundreds of metres it can manage with the Dark Knight at the helm. A slide switch retracts the rope back into the housing spool for ultimate ease of use.

www.forbiddenplanet.com

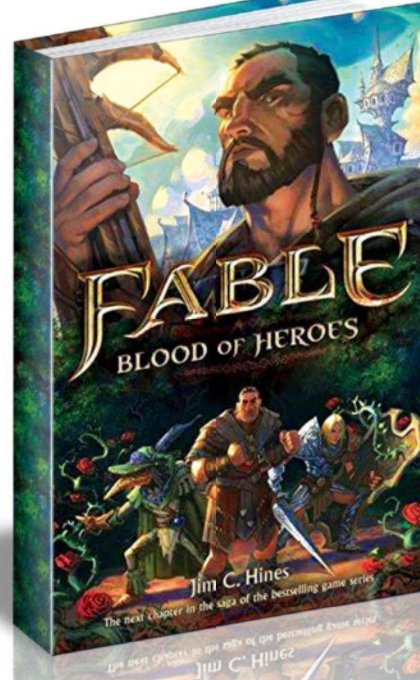




FABLE: BLOOD OF HEROES

PUBLISHER: **TITAN BOOKS**

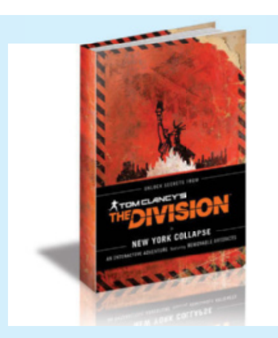


AHEAD OF FABLE Legends' release on Xbox One and Windows 10 comes the official companion novel featuring the heroes that you should expect to see when the game is finally released. The story starts out in the city of Brightlodge, when someone tries to burn down the Cock and Bard inn (seriously). From here the book follows four heroes in their quest to find out who caused the fire – but when they discover that a greater evil is at work four more join the fray, and the quest soon becomes much more serious.

Well, to a point. Of course the *Fable* series is known in part for its sense of humour, and it's something that Jim C. Hines has done an excellent job of converting into novel form. It's not laugh-out-loud funny, but its likely to raise a smile, even to those who have never played a *Fable* game before. The story is told from the point of view of the eight heroes, with each one getting a chapter to themselves – yes, it *is* very *Game Of Thrones*. Sadly, unlike George R. R. Martin's epic, the heroes don't feel like they have all that much character. Aside from a few exchanges, all eight feel like identikit heroes from any other fantasy novel. Still, we're sure that, after a few hours with *Fable Legends*' story mode once we actually know the characters properly, Tipple's idiotic one-liners and Leech's… weirdness, we'll start liking them a little more. We expect that these class archetypes work far better in a game setting than they do on paper. For now, though, only *Fable* fanatics need apply.

www.titanbooks.com


VERDICT 6/10



THE DIVISION: NEW YORK COLLAPSE

This field guide is designed to give you tips on how to survive in an urban collapse, but through notes in the margins and seven removable artefacts you will start to learn the story of a woman living in New York when the virus is released on Black Friday – the opening to *The Division*.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



XCOM 2: THE OFFICIAL NOVELISATION

For console gamers disappointed that *XCOM 2* will only be appearing on PC, this is perhaps the next best thing – a novelisation of the game's storyline. This book explains how the governments of the world come together to repel the alien threat through the forming of *XCOM*.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



ASSASSIN'S CREED: THE COMPLETE VISUAL HISTORY

Assassin's Creed has always done a wonderful job of creating stunning worlds for players to explore. This book explores the art and history of the series from the very first game to the graphic novels and DLC content.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



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